

Far Lochaber

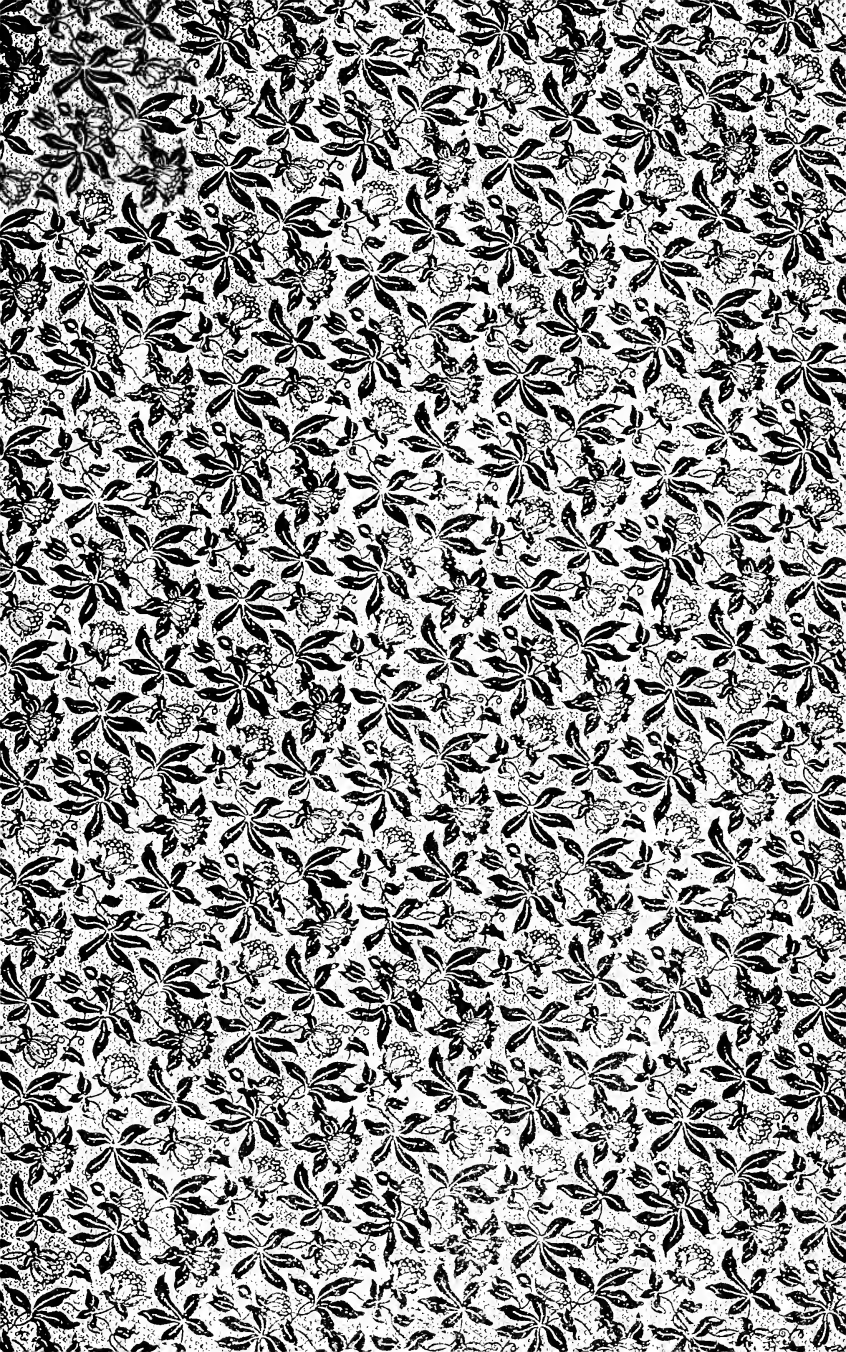


By William Black



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IN FAR LOCHABER.

BY

WILLIAM BLACK,

AUTHOR OF

"A PRINCESS OF THULE," "MACLEOD OF DARE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. "FAREWELL TO LOCHABER" ...	I
II. THE COWANS OF CORBIESLAW ...	44
III. HITHER AND THITHER ...	79
IV. A VISITOR ...	115
V. INTERVENTION ...	152
VI. A SUMMONS ...	188
VII. AN EXPEDITION ...	220
VIII. PRINCESS DEIRDRI ...	250

IN FAR LOCHABER.



CHAPTER I.

“FAREWELL TO LOCHABER.”

ON the afternoon of the day previous to her departure, Alison was summoned to her aunt's room.

“Now, Alison,” said the old dame severely, “ye're not going to make me angry with ye just as ye are leaving; ye've got to put your pride in your pocket and behave like a sensible young Christian. as I have no doubt ye are. Oh yes, Christian enough: I'm thinking they folk in Kirk o' Shields make a fine inroad on

your bits o' sixpences for their collections, and subscriptions, and mission societies, and Dorcas meetings, and the like; and ye must remember that the people about here are free-handed in their ways; and when ye're going away, ye must do what's becoming——”

Alison flushed quickly.

“Yes, aunt; but my father gave me some money before I left——”

“Yes, yes,” said Aunt Gilchrist somewhat dryly, “but the Kirk o' Shields folk and the Highland folk are different. And it's my own pride that's at stake; for you are my niece—my niece with expectations, as the saying is; and I'm not going to allow you to dip into your little store o' pocket-money on my account. Well, ye see, here's a wee bit bag—now, Alison, ye're not to make me angry! I dare ye to quarrel wi' me just as ye're going away!—and ye'll find half-crowns and shillings

and sixpences in it : that's for any one that has done ye a civil turn—the men at the quay, or that rascal John, or the stable lad, if ye see him ; and then there's the folk that will help you wi' your luggage to-morrow, and the like. But as for the cook, and as for that clever and willing lass, Maggie, well, I've bought each o' them a printed cotton gown—the parcel's lying there—and ye'll just present it to them in your own name——”

“Aunt Gilchrist, I could not do that !” Alison pleaded.

“But I say ye'll have to do that !” retorted this imperious small person. “I want ye to leave a friendly recollection behind ye ; and I will say for these Highland creatures—that they have a long memory for any one that has been civil to them.”

“But you're Highland yourself, auntie !” said Alison, who could hardly help laugh-

ing at Aunt Gilchrist's assumption of a superior Scotch sagacity and her consequent patronage of the simple-minded Celts.

“Never you mind what I am. Empty that bit bag into your pocket, and take away the cotton gowns wi' ye; and just remember that a friendly word will make what ye give twenty times more welcome.”

As it chanced, the first person to come in for his share of these vails was the lad John, whom Alison happened to descry from her bedroom window. He was down at the shore; and as she was rather shy about this unaccustomed duty, she thought she would slip out of the house, and tackle Johnny at once. So she went downstairs, opened the door, crossed the road, and adventured forth upon the rough shingle of the beach.

But what was this that Johnny was about? He had got on to one of the big stones that ran out into the sea, forming

a kind of slip, and he had possessed himself of some old basket or hamper, which he was carefully holding down in the water. When he heard footsteps on the shingle behind him, he turned ; and the instant he saw who it was, his broad face grinned joyously and eagerly.

“Come here, mem ! Come here, mem, and look at this little duffle ! Ah, he’s caught now ! He’ll not be for biting any one’s thumb now ; no, nor catching you by the foot in the night-time. Look at him, mem !”

Alison had stepped out on the big stones ; but she could see nothing through the rough wicker-work of the basket.

“What is in there ?” she demanded, becoming instantly suspicious of some demoniac mischief.

“A rat, mem !” said Johnny, with much glee.

“And what are you doing ?”

“Oh, well, I am showing him that I am the master now. If his teeth were in your hand, then he would be the master; but now he knows ferry well indeed that I am the master. See this, mem, I can sunk and sunk the basket; and up and up he comes to the top; but he cannot get his head through; and I can sunk him until there is nothing but his nose above the water. Look at him, mem!—look at him! who is the master now, you little duffle?”

“Johnny!” cried Alison in great anger. “It is nothing but horrible and hideous cruelty! Stop it at once! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“And would there be no cruelty if he could grup ye by the wrist?—and that’s what the little duffle would like to do,” said Johnny, with wide-staring eyes.

“I will tell Captain Macdonell, and he will give you a good lashing!” she retorted.

“And do you think, mem, that Mac-

donell likes rats any more as any one else?" said Johnny, still surprised by her interference.

"I know he hates cruelty, and that he will let you know what a horsewhip is!" she said somewhat hotly. "Open that basket at once, and let the poor beast out!"

"Oh, ferry well, mem—you can let him out yourself, if you like," said he, with a grin; and he drew up the basket from the water and placed it on the stone before her.

At this suggestion, Alison shrank back so that she nearly over-balanced herself into the sea, whereupon Johnny only grinned the more.

"No, mem, you do not like him either," said he. "And if I let him out, where will he go? He will go back to the house; and some night, when you are crossing the floor, he will catch you by the

ankle or the toes. Yes, and do you know this—that these little duffles have teeth that cross, and when they shut them on you, you cannot get them open again? That's ferry nice, is it not? And if I drown him it's a good chob too!"

"I don't care whether you drown him or not; but you shall not torture him—do you hear?"

"Well, I will gif him a chance for his life—though it's more than he would gif me if he had me by the throat," said John; and therewith he stooped down and undid the bit of string fastening the lid. Then he raised the basket with both hands, and flung it from him into the sea. There was a mighty souse; the lid got partly opened; and presently the escaped rat could be seen making its way ashore, where it presently disappeared among the stones.

"Johnny," said Alison, as they turned away, "why are you such a bad boy?"

And why are you so lazy? Here's Miss Flora complaining again that you won't keep the borders clipped and the paths tidy——"

"It's Miss Flora's own fault," said John sulkily. "She'll no let me kull the cats. It's the cats that scratches up the gravel and the borders, and she'll no let me kull them."

"But why should you want to kill things?" Alison remonstrated. "Why should you be so cruel? Now, look here, Johnny, I'm going away to-morrow morning; and I don't know whether I shall ever be back in Fort William; but I should like to think you were behaving better. And here is a little present for you; and a book—it's all about birds and animals, and if you would only read about the care and trouble they take in bringing up their young ones, I am sure you wouldn't harm them."

Johnny professed to accept the half-crown with a great deal of shamefaced reluctance ; but the gleam of satisfaction on his face entirely belied him. As for the book, he received that with honest indifference. And yet he was not ungrateful ; moreover, he liked Alison, who had been in a measure a kind of chum of his ; so, in view of her going away, and with some vague notion of making her a return for these gifts, he asked her if she would like to see a witch.

“ A witch ? ” she said. “ Of course not ! But what do you know about a witch ? ”

“ There’s one in the town,” said he, looking round to make sure he was not overheard. “ She lifs in a cellar underneath one of the houses. Oh, she iss a fearful woman, that ! But if you tek her money, she will gif you something that iss ferry good at night for keeping aweh the ghosts and such things ; oh yes, I hef seen

it ; it iss a bit of an ash-tree and a bit of a rowan-tree, and it iss tied together by a piece of red thread, and there iss red wax on it. You put it on the mantelpiece, and the ghosts are afrait of it ; they cannot come into the room either by the window or the door. Will you go and see her ? ”

“ I will not ! ” said Alison. “ Why, you should be ashamed of yourself for filling your head with such nonsense ! Witches and ghosts ! I can hardly think that you believe in such stuff.”

“ Cosh, then, there’s more than me believes in them,” said Johnny, significantly, and therewith their talk came to an end ; for they were now arrived at the house, and Johnny went away to put his treasures in a place of safety.

Next morning she was up betimes, and busily engaged in packing ; but when that was finished, and as the hour of her departure came nearer, her cheerful com-

posure and self-confidence, which she had striven valiantly to preserve, began to yield a little; and more than once she returned to her own small room, and sat down at the window there, as if she would take a long last look at this beautiful place she was leaving. All shining it was: the sea a plain of palest blue crossed by silver sheets of calm; the rich October tints of the hills—of the withered bracken, and the rowan-trees, and the golden-leaved birch—softened somewhat by a thin dream-like haze. But perhaps it was not merely to impress this scene on her memory that she thus from time to time, and rather nervously, sought the solitude of her own room. The window commanded a view of the road in front in both directions—southward along the shores of the loch, northward to the town and the quay; and she could see any stranger approaching at a considerable distance. And sometimes,

amidst all the down-heartedness of her going, she experienced a sudden and joyous elation : it was the very fact of her departure that made it a certainty that Ludovick Macdonell would come to see her ; she could not think it possible that he would let her leave for the south without a word or a look of farewell.

In the mean time she had to say good-bye to her Aunt Gilchrist, who was not going down to the quay ; and also to the Doctor, who was setting out on his professional rounds.

" Well, now, Alison," her uncle said, " since you know the ways of the house, I hope you will not wait for an invitation from your Aunt Gilchrist if you should happen to have a few holidays, and would care to come and see us again. You will always be very welcome—you know that. But I think your Aunt Gilchrist will be for asking you to go and see her during the

winter—at the Rothesay Hydropathic, most likely; and if you are well-advised you will go, for I understand she is going to have some settlement of her property made. And when she makes you a rich woman, Alison, then you'll come and tyrannize over us just as she does, and we'll all pay court to you, and put up as best we can with your unreasonableness and your bad temper."

"Well, uncle," Alison said, with a smile, "I don't think it is Aunt Gilchrist's money that enables her to tyrannize over you; it is her peripheral neuralgia; and she can't make me a present of *that*. But I'm sure I don't want anything from Aunt Gilchrist—except an invitation now and again; and I hope the next one I get will bring me here, if you will have me."

"Oh yes, we will try to put up with you," her uncle said good-naturedly. "You come and see. And now good-bye,

Alison, and take care of yourself ; and if you bring back a sweetheart with you, we'll make him welcome too."

Then it was Johnny's turn to take leave of her, in a more secret fashion than was possible down at the quay. He watched his chance, and came quickly up.

"Here, mem ! I hef got it for you," said he, in an undertone ; and he slipped something into Alison's hand. She looked at it. It was an oblong tin match-box.

"What's this, Johnny ?" she said.

"I wass along to the witch," said he eagerly. "And I hef got the thing that will keep the ghosts and ahl the bad things aweh from you at night ; and it's in that box ; and no one will know but that it iss only matches. Oh yes, it iss a fine sure thing ; you will put it on the mantlepiece at night, and there's not a ghost or anything of that kind will come near you."

Alison hardly knew what to do : she

could hardly refuse a farewell gift, which was probably the most valuable thing the young rascal could think of. Then it occurred to her that perhaps, to obtain it, he had dipped into that little store of money she had given him.

“Did you pay anything for it, Johnny?” she made bold to ask.

“Oh no, mem,” he said. “She would not tek money from me, for she comes from my own part of the country. But sometimes I gif her a rabbit, or some such thing; for it iss ahlways better to keep friends with them kind of people. Cosh, that iss a stranche thing to think of—a hare eating a rabbit!”

“What hare?” Alison asked in amazement.

“Do you not know that the witches can turn themselves into hares when they like?” Johnny asked; but he was evidently surprised by her extraordinary

ignorance. "Ay, ay, and that's the time to catch them, for they cannot do you any harm then." He grinned from ear to ear. "That would be a fine thing now!—to catch one in the streets of Fort William, and to chase her, with a crowd of people ahl with sticks and stones——"

Suddenly Johnny became silent and slunk mysteriously away: he had perceived Miss Flora approaching, and he knew she was almost certain to put him on to some perfectly useless task in the garden; whereas in an out-house at the back there was a young puppy-dog of a collie that he could spend an agreeable half-hour in tormenting before having to wheel the luggage down to the steamer.

"I suppose you have everything ready, Alison?" Flora said, when she came up.

Alison answered that she had.

"Isn't it strange that Ludovick hasn't put in an appearance?" her cousin con-

tinued. "I made sure he would come to say good-bye to you. Those alterations at Oyre can't be of so much importance ; though I must say for him that any wish of his father's is law to him. Never mind, Hugh is going with us—think of that condescension!—he is going to see you safe into the railway-carriage, and come back in the steamer with me. This is an assurance of his profound consideration that I hardly ever knew him bestow on any one—any girl—before ; and I hope you are grateful. He told me yesterday that you had become quite like one of the family ; and that he didn't see the use of your going away at all. Think of that, Miss Dimity ! And if you only heard what he has been saying about you to Ludovick——"

Alison started somewhat, and looked apprehensive.

"Oh, a wonderful lot of discoveries, I

assure you!—about the expression of your eyes; and how you were always the first to see anything humorous, but you didn't laugh—it was only a little bit of a smile that betrayed you; and what a clear penetration and judgment you had; and how admirable your manner was towards old people—and—and how elegantly you walked—goodness gracious, I don't remember half the pretty things he said!”

“I dare say not,” Alison said dryly. “And yet it is very kind of you, Flora, to invent so many.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, how could you know what Hugh said to Captain Macdonell?”

“For the simple reason, my dear Miss Dimity, that Captain Macdonell himself told me; and I can tell you he sets great store by Hugh's opinion, though Hugh is only a boy compared with him. However, that is not the question. It was Hugh I

was speaking of ; and you ought to be proud and pleased that he quite approves of you now. Oh yes, indeed ; you have won a small share of my lord's condescending notice ; you're not half bad to look at, you know, and you've got a very tolerable kind of brain—for a woman. Accordingly, he is going with us on the steamer."

But it was not of Hugh's approval, nor yet of his condescension in coming with them, that Alison was thinking as they walked along to the quay ; and while they waited there for the steamer, though she strove to conceal her ever-increasing anxiety, she seemed to see in every distant figure the possibility of its being Ludovick Macdonell. She talked to Flora, she talked to Hugh ; but her eyes would go furtively wandering ; and as the steamer was now on its way down from Corpach, every moment she became more anxious

and perturbed. Now and again she would assure herself that a certain stranger in the distance must necessarily be he ; and she would listen to Flora and to Hugh with a forced attention ; then it became clear to her that this stranger was only a stranger, and her heart would sink again with its bitter disappointment. Then here was the steamer approaching. Johnny was getting the luggage ready. A small crowd of people had congregated at the end of the quay. The throb of the paddles was becoming more and more distinct ; the red funnels were coming nearer and nearer ; Hugh would have her stand well out of the way of the ropes ; and finally, when the steamer had stopped, and the passengers were getting on board, she knew, as she put her foot on the gangway, that she was going away without even a parting word or a glance.

Up to the last moment she had been

in hopes—nay, she had been strenuously convincing herself that it was certain—that he would make his appearance ; but now the gangways were withdrawn, the hawsers thrown from the quay, and the big steamer was throbbing its onward way to the south. She looked at the now fast-receding land, and there was no one there to send her a last token of farewell. And perhaps it was only the fact of her leaving that beautiful neighbourhood—where love had found her, for a brief moment or two, and forsaken her—that made her heart ache so, and caused cruel tears to well into her eyes. She was ashamed, and tried to hide her face from Flora ; but her cousin put her hand within her arm.

“Alison,” said she, in a very kindly fashion, “I’m not so sorry that you don’t like leaving Fort William ; but you must just remember that you are coming back ; and you are not likely to find the place much

changed, or the people either. And the sooner you come back the better. Oh yes, you have made plenty of friends here. It is a wonder that Ludovick didn't come to see you off,” she continued, in an inadvertent sort of way; “but I suppose he is busy. He did not send you any message, did he?”

Alison shook her head slightly; she could not trust herself to speak just then.

“That is not like him,” Flora said. “But then young men are so careless. It's here to-day and gone to-morrow; and you're out of their thoughts five minutes after they've left you. And that's the best way to treat them, I find,” she continued, no doubt with the most honest intention of comforting her cousin. “I've never seen the man yet that I would break my heart about; it's much the better way to amuse yourself with them, and let them go, and no harm done. They talk about

women being so heartless and fickle : it's absolute rubbish. Trust a man for making love to any woman he meets, and then going off without remembering her name, most likely. The best way is to treat them as they treat you—get what fun you can out of them, and care no more about them."

But these friendly counsels fell for the most part on an unheeding ear ; for Alison, once the cruel pang of disappointment was over, was trying, in rather a dull and hopeless fashion, to find out for herself what was the probable cause of his staying away. Long thereafter she could remember, and with an intense and lurid vividness, every feature and incident and aspect of that dark and miserable southward sail. The day had changed considerably ; the fair blue calm was gone ; a breeze had sprung up, and there were heavy masses of cloud gathering in the sky ; the sea was

a moving, stirring plain of pale purplish-gray, with here and there a distant white speck of a yacht. She sat and blankly looked, heavy-hearted enough. And the farther and farther they got south, the day became more sombre, though it was still beautiful in its deep rich tones. For it was not altogether gloom. There were silver gleams among those overhanging masses of cloud ; and the violet hills had an occasional streak of greenish-yellow where the misty sunlight fell on the far shoulders. She seemed to be encircled by these hills ; and when, getting away down by Appin and Lismore, she turned to have a last glimpse of the pleasant rose-coloured holiday-land in which she had been living, behold ! that appeared to be now completely shut off by a wall of mountains, dark-hued and forbidding and stern. Were they enclosing, then, as with an impassable barrier, that fair rose-tinted

land—that joyous garden, as it had seemed to her, full of beautiful things and sunlight and pleasant memories? Her heart ached with the throbbing of this steamer that was bearing her away so pitilessly; her eyes were blinded with tears that she could not repress; and these varying winds that came blowing about, if there was any voice in them at all, seemed to be saying, “*Lochaber no more! Lochaber no more!*” and to keep repeating and repeating the old, familiar, and inexpressibly sad refrain.

From this dull lethargy of grief and aimless conjecture she was soon to be startled by an unexpected revelation brought about in the most casual way. Hugh had gone forward to look after his luggage, for they were now nearing Oban, and Flora took the occasion of his absence to say to her cousin—

“Do you know, Alison, I have thought once or twice that there was something

between you and Ludovick ; and I'm rather glad to imagine now that there isn't."

Alison, with a quick flush in her face, looked up ; but what could she say ? There was no confession for her to make. How could there be anything between her and Ludovick Macdonell when he had not even taken the trouble to come and say good-bye to her when she was going away to the south ?

"I am glad for this reason," Flora continued in a very matter-of-fact fashion : "You see, it wouldn't matter much to me, or to any girl brought up in a part of the Highlands where there are plenty of Catholics of the better class, and used to meeting them, and not accustomed to put much store by differences of that kind. But for you, Alison, the daughter of a Free Church minister, to marry a Catholic——"

“Flora!” cried Alison, with a sudden strange look in her eyes—“is Captain Macdonell a Roman Catholic?”

“Why, of course! Didn’t you know? You must have known!” Flora said, but without noticing the singular expression that had passed so swiftly over her companion’s face. “Well, perhaps not. We don’t make much of such differences in our house; many of our best friends are Catholics; and I suppose it never occurred to any one to tell you that Ludovick was a Catholic, like the rest of his family. However, I’m very glad his liking for you—and he didn’t make much secret of it, did he?—and his continual talking about you and praising you, I am glad it did not lead to anything more serious; for, you know, your friends in Kirk o’ Shields are not so tolerant and Sadduceeist as some of us up here, and I dare say they would open their eyes if you proposed to

marry a Catholic. I say ‘a Catholic,’ Miss Dimity Puritan: ‘Roman’ Catholic is hardly civil.”

By this time Alison had effectually regained her composure: outwardly she was quite calm. She knew that the final knell of severance had sounded. Those anxious conjectures as to the cause of his absence were useless now. Nay, was it not better that he should so openly have declared his indifference towards her? That dream was over; and here they were at the quay; and she had some small packages and belongings to look after in the cabin. When they got ashore, she gave Hugh her purse, insisting on paying for her own railway-ticket; she talked pleasantly to them as they went along the platform with her; she smiled a good-bye to them, and waved her hand as the train moved out of the station. And then it was, on suddenly finding herself cut off from these kind

friends, and left absolutely alone, that her brave self-confidence, which had sustained her so far, deserted her ; a horror of loneliness and blackness and despair seemed to overwhelm her ; she buried her head in her hands and broke into a passionate fit of weeping. Yet even then she made a struggle to believe that this that had happened was better so. If there was to be a final renunciation, let it be over and done with. Life would never again be the same for her ; certain memories would have to be locked away for ever ; she would have to face the remaining years as others had had to face them. But, as the tears rained down her hands, she thought he might have come to say good-bye.

So the train sped on its way, by the placid shores of Loch Etive, through the gloomy Pass of Brander, under the mighty bulk of Ben Cruachan, and along the wooded banks of Loch Awe ; but it was little

notice she took of the deep purple hills, the silver-gleaming clouds, the wide rippling waters of the lake, and the gray ruins of Kilchuirn. She sat in a corner of the carriage (fortunately she was the sole occupant, this being an idle time of the year) trying to reason herself out of her childish grief, and resolved to banish this fond illusion that had possessed her for a time. These words that he had spoken to her in the old garden at Oyre?—well, perhaps he had believed them at the moment; it was a passing fancy; she had gone, and he had forgotten them. Flora was right. There was common sense in what she said. All this that had happened was but a dream of beautiful impossibilities; she had left that rose-garden of romance; a wall of dark mountains intervened now; she should return to Lochaber no more. Only the measured rattle of this railway-train was just like the throbbing of the

paddles of the steamer ; it seemed to keep alive the aching pain at her heart, and she could get no rest.

Station after station went by ; sometimes she passively regarded these elderly folk, and wondered whether they had quite forgotten now all the sorrows and vain hopes of their youth. And then, of a sudden, as the train was slowing into Tyndrum station, the colour forsook her face, and her eyes were filled with wonder, almost with fear. That was but for the fiftieth part of a second. She sprang to her feet : “ Ludovick ! Ludovick ! ” she cried ; her trembling hands pulled at the strap of the window to let it down, and pulled in vain, for she hardly knew what she was doing. But the next moment Ludovick Macdonell was there ; and her heart leaped up with pride and joy and gratitude to see how buoyant and confident and assured he looked ; the door was

opened and he came lightly into the carriage ; and how was she to prevent her face from growing rosy-red or tears of gladness from swimming into her eyes ? Nay, she did not try to conceal her joy—she could not ; she forgot to ask why or how he had come ; it was enough that he was here, and that all the world seemed suddenly full of radiance and happiness. As for him, he was coolly shutting the carriage-door ; and then he took the seat opposite her, and put his hand on her hand for a moment, and she did not withdraw it.

“ I suppose you wondered why I did not come to see you away at Fort William ? ” said he (and it was so pleasant to her to hear his voice again : all dark imaginings and griefs seemed to flee away : he brought hope, assurance, confidence with him).

“ Oh, never mind,” she said, rather incoherently (for she was terribly conscious

of the tell-tale colour in her face, and her eyes were cast down lest she should reveal too much of the happy light that was there). "But—but I am so glad to see you for a moment before going home. Yes, I—I expected you to come to say good-bye, and I was—I was a little disappointed ; but Flora said you would be busy, and it did not matter."

"It did not matter?" said he in great surprise. "What do you mean, Alison? I think it mattered a good deal. But I did not want to say good-bye to you before all these people ; and I knew that Hugh and Flora were going back by the steamer ; so yesterday morning I thought I would treat myself to a nice little driving-trip—down Glencoe and across the Black Mount Forest by Inveroran—and take my chance of meeting you in the train. I made pretty sure I should find you."

"And did you come all that way," said

she, looking up for a second with something more than gratitude in her eyes, “merely to—to come and see me?”

“To see you?—yes, to have a word or two with you,” he answered. “For of course I could not let you go away home without some explanation. You see, Alison,” he continued, and he took her hand again and held it, “I know I can’t make pretty phrases, and perhaps I shouldn’t have blurted out what I said to you at Oyre; but now you know—you know what I hope for, and I’ll tell you the truth: the real reason why I didn’t come to see you this morning at Fort William—the reason why I took my chance of having a word with you in the train, or at the end of the journey, was this, that I wanted to beg from you some kind of a promise—not too definite, if that would frighten you, but still something—something that would assure me that sooner or later—and I

would not be impatient if that vexed you—merely some kind of assurance that sooner or later you would be my wife.”

And now for the first moment since she had been bewildered by his sudden appearance, Alison began to recover her senses. She had been so overjoyed at seeing him, after the bitter disappointment of the morning, that she had thought of nothing else. But this prayer of his, that she should, in however vague a fashion, give him some kind of promise, recalled to her in a sufficiently startling manner what she had wholly forgotten—their relative positions, and Flora’s warning. She gently released her hand.

“No, I cannot give you that promise,” said she, in a low voice and with downcast eyes, “neither now nor at any future time. I—I must be frank with you, for you have been very kind to me. And it is like the rest of your kindness to have taken all this

trouble to come and say good-bye, and—and it is to be a last good-bye.”

“Alison,” said he rather breathlessly, “I won’t take that as your last word !”

“It is to be the last word,” she said, with pale lips.

He wanted to seize her hand again, but she refused.

“Alison,” he pleaded, “you must tell me why. I cannot take it as your last word. If you do not care enough for me at present, then that means that I have spoken too soon, and you will give me a chance and see what time will do. Or is there any one else ?”

She shook her head.

“Then why, Alison,” he said eagerly—“why should it be all over between us ? No, I won’t believe it. What is the reason ?”

She hesitated for some time ; she would rather have avoided the pain of explana-

tion ; would it not be better for both that he should simply go away, and that these two should see each other no more ? At length she said, rather sadly—

“ You never would understand. You don’t know how I have been brought up ; or how my relations and the people they live amongst look upon a Roman Catholic. It seems quite different in my uncle’s family ; none of them ever thought of telling me you were a Catholic, until Flora accidentally mentioned it this morning ; but now—— ”

“ And is that all ? ” he exclaimed quickly. “ Alison, is that all ? Is that your only objection ? Did you never hear of Catholics and Protestants intermarrying ? ”

He seemed quite rejoiced to hear that this was the only obstacle ; and it was only by slow degrees, as he pleaded and argued and remonstrated, that he came to perceive how serious a one it was. Nay, he began

to feel a little remorse : his eagerness to win her consent, seemed to savour of persecution ; for she listened so patiently, and yet with such a hopeless silence and sadness, to all his persuasions and prayers. At length he said—

“Alison, if I were secure of your love, I should have no fear that any difference of creed would come between us.”

She did not answer.

And then again he said—

“Well, now, I am not going to press you too hard, Alison, if it is against your will ; but you will think over what I have said to you ; and mind, I understand more than you imagine about the prejudice against us Catholics that exists among some of the stricter Protestants. I thought you knew all along that I was a Catholic ; and if it was only to-day you were told, of course I can understand how you were surprised, and how there has been no time

for you to get over your first alarm. I wish you could live in a Catholic district of the Highlands for a year or two; you would find that the Catholics are not a terrible people at all, that they are just as well-meaning and as easy to get on with as any others. But I'm not going to force you to promise anything against your will, Alison; I would rather you would wait and think; and I am not despondent about the result. In the mean time, what am I to do? I had intended going on with you to Kirk o' Shields; I had some vague notion you might introduce me to your family and friends. But I see that wouldn't do at present—that would only embarrass you, wouldn't it? We shall be at Dunblane in a few minutes; will you take it ill if I leave you there?"

She looked at him with kind eyes: she understood his forbearance and consideration.

“Yes, that would be better,” she said.

“But I am going to write to you, Alison,” said he boldly, “and if I can’t persuade you that way, well, then, I must come and see you, and confront the whole clan of your friends, if they are for bidding you beware of a Catholic. Why, in these days it is too absurd to think of religious differences separating human beings who have a real regard for each other. That’s all gone and past. And especially you of all people—you, who are so clear-headed—why, if you have acquired any prejudice of that kind, you must have imbibed it unawares; it is something quite foreign to your whole nature.”

The train was entering Dunblane station.

“Alison, I will write to you in a few days. Will you answer my letter?”

“Yes, I will,” she said; and she regarded him with straightforward and honest eyes, that yet were gentle and kindly too; “but

I know what it will be : it will be to ask you to abandon an idea that would only lead to misery—I mean to the misery of many people besides ourselves. That is what I fear—what I know. We will say good-bye now, and it will be better for you to forget that you ever saw me.”

“Ah, you are faint-hearted at present,” said he confidently and cheerfully ; “but wait : wait, and call in your own clear judgment to aid you. And mind, Alison, if you can bring your heart to say yes, you are not going to let it say no because of the opinions or prejudices of your relatives and friends : in that case you will have me coming through to Kirk o’ Shields to fight the whole array of them. Well, good-bye, Alison, and God bless you !—it will not be so long before we meet again !”

The little country station was all flooded with the golden light of the afternoon ; and in the midst of that glow, for some

time after the train had left, she could still make out the well-known, firm-set figure, the sun-browned cheek, and familiar Tam o' Shanter. And when at length she was left alone with her own thoughts, her heart was far less heavy than it had been during the earlier part of the day. Severance—the bitterness of renunciation—might be before her; nay, she had already faced that as a certainty, and with a sufficiency of courage. But however dark and hopeless the future might be, at least, here and now, she knew she had not been mistaken in her friend; and she was proudly conscious that, whatever else might be in store for her, to be slighted and forgotten by Ludovick Macdonell was the last thing she had to fear.

CHAPTER II.

THE COWANS OF CORBIESLAW.

ON the bleak uplands lying to the east of Kirk o' Shields stands the farm-house of Corbieslaw. It is a dismal and lonely place ; the buildings and byres all of stone and slate ; not a tree or a bush anywhere around ; while its considerable acreage of arable and pasture land is divided, not by hedges, but by stone walls as grimy and melancholy-looking as Corbieslaw itself. No bird sings here in spring or summer. The fumes and smoke of Kirk o' Shields keep an almost perpetual grayness in the skies, save at night, when the dull red

glow of the distant iron-works flushes across the darkened heavens.

One afternoon, some few days after Alison's return from the Highlands, Alexander Cowan of Corbieslaw was standing at his own front door. He was a man of about sixty; a huge, heavy, unwieldy-looking person, sallow-complexioned, large-eared, thick-lipped, with nostrils like those of a monkey, and with small, twinkling vindictive eyes—eyes that, compared with the extent of his face, somewhat resembled those of an elephant, and seemed capable, like those of an elephant, of preserving a pretty accurate recollection of any one who had injured him. Mr. Cowan was not in his ordinary farmer dress; he was clad in a loose, ill-fitting suit of Sunday black; he was carefully shaved; and he would no doubt have been grave and solemn of demeanour but that the unaccustomed stiffness of his shirt-collar seemed

to irritate him considerably, producing from time to time (as he was vainly endeavouring to set matters right) an expression of anger that ought not to have appeared on the face of a ruling elder of the Free Church.

Presently he was joined by his wife—a little, thin, sharp-looking woman, with a profusion of shining black bugles about her dress, and a mass of artificial roses and fuchsias in her bonnet.

“I hae just been thinking, Mysie,” said he, in a slow and oracular fashion, which would have been more impressive but that in speaking he added an “h” to every “s,” so that the continual “hish-hish” sounded as if his mouth was full of boiled turnip; “I hae just been conseederin’ that the Minister cannot tak’ it ill that we should approach him on this subjeck, for there’s plenty o’ Scriptural precedents for it; I could gie him chapter and verse a

dizzen times ower, if it was needed. But e'en without that he maun see how it will be a strengthening o' the Lord's Church through faimily bonds. Ay, through faimily bonds. When ye're putting off your bonnet, Mysie, or when ye're coming away at the end o' the evening, ye'll be seeing the lass by hersel'; and ye can gie her a bit hint to remember what I hae done for her faither in times past; and ye can show her what a bringing thegither o' the two faimilies would be in the future—a bulwark and a surety, and a warning to they ill-thrawn folk that would tear the congregation to pieces wi' their bickerings and yaumerings. She's a sensible kind o' lass; she'll understand ye, I warrant. As for the Minister, I'll hae a word wi' him when ye're out o' the room; though it's no the first—no, no—weel he kens what we've had in our mind, but maybe I'll speak a bit plainer, ye see. Ay, and I shouldna

wonder if it was borne in on him that this thing came from the Lord; as Laban and Bethuel said to Abraham's messenger, that went on a like errand, 'The thing proceedeth from the Lord: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good.' That's the main point to remember. I say it would be for the benefit of the Church at lairge, and our own East Street Church in parteeclar; and everybody kens what a fecht I've had, in upholding the Minister through good report and bad report, for he has his enemies, poor man, and ill-wishers—they heedless young fellows, that think nothing o' the fundamentals o' their faith, but are aye crying out about the elocutioners and poetry-mongers they've heard in Glesca. Oh ay, the Minister kens what I've done for him."

"I'm sure it would be a very good thing for James," observed Mrs. Cowan, who spoke Edinburgh-wise, and with more pre-

tensions to elegance than her husband. "They say that Alison Blair will have nearly everything her aunt has to leave; and it's no concern o' ours whether the money came frae a distillery or not. It would be a fine thing for James; for a young probationer with a wife that is known to be well provided for is regarded wi' favour, and has a better chance of a call: the responsible members o' the congregation understand that the young lasses will no be a' setting their caps at him; and, besides that, he will be able to keep up a proper style, and have entertainment for his friends, and no be aye begging and begging for an increase o' stipend. Poor James—look at him now! Many's the time my heart is sore to think of the poor lad slaving away at they sermons, that nobody ever asks him for. He is just that diligent; but what's the use? It's a' very fine to call the probationers

‘guinea-pigs’; I would like to see more o’ the guineas; but not one has he had; and there’s Mr. Blair—you would think he might go away for a single Sabbath, just to lend his pulpit to the lad, to say nothing o’ the guinea as a kind of encouragement. But no. And how do they expect a probationer to become a capable preacher if they never give him the chance of a pulpit?”

Now, during this sympathetic speech the farmer’s face had been growing more and more morose; and at last he said sullenly—

“He would hae made a chance for himself, if he hadna been such a poor, feckless, helpless, spiritless crayture.”

Then fierce as fire the mother retorted, in defence of her first-born—

“And if he is that, who made him that? Ay, well ye ken who made him what he is!”

“I have brought him up as a child

should be brought up," the farmer said sternly, "in the fear of the Lord."

"In the fear of a whip-lash!" was the angry rejoinder; and then she proceeded, with bitter vehemence: "Yes, it is well for you to complain now when ye've crushed and cowed the spirit out o' the poor lad all his life long! The fear of the Lord? The fear of a whip-lash—that's what I call it; and the fear of being locked up among the rats in an empty barn, night after night, for just nothing at all. You may have forgotten, but I've not forgotten, the time ye went to fetch him home frae Garlieston—driving him before ye wi' a horse-whip—you a great big man, and him a little white-faced boy. No wonder the folk turned out and followed ye, and hooted ye, and threw stones at ye!"

The small eyes in the farmer's big, coarse face had grown darker and darker.

“If I had got my whip round their legs,” he said, between his teeth, “I’d hae sent that Irish rabble skelpin’ back to their ain business. Here, Rob!” he suddenly roared to a servant-man who chanced to come along. “Go round to the yard, and tell that fellow Chalmers that if I’m kept waiting here anither three minutes for that dog-cart he’ll be out o’ my service the morn’s morning, as sure’s there’s a sky aboon our heads!”

But just at this moment the dog-cart opportunely made its appearance; and at the same time the sound of the wheels brought forth from the house the young man who had been the subject of the recent altercation. This James Cowan—the Rev. James Cowan he was called by courtesy—was rather under middle height, slight of physique, and stooping a little; with a pale complexion, a large, weak, sensitive mouth, a feeble jaw and chin, no

great height of forehead, and lank fair hair that he wore long behind. But what was chiefly noticeable about him was the curiously vacuous expression of his face, coupled with the quick and furtive look of his eyes. It was not an intelligent look ; but at least it was alert and observant—like the apprehensiveness of some dumb animal that has just been beaten, and is on the watch for the reappearance of the stick—and it did something to relieve the hopeless apathy of his features. For the rest he also was clad in black ; but with no touch of the smartness and neatness natural to a young man ; and without a word or a sign to any one he took his place on the back seat of the dog-cart, where he was joined by the farm-servant, when the farmer and his wife had got up in front. Then they drove away in the direction of Kirk o' Shields.

No one spoke during the drive ; and at

length, when they had got near to the town, the farmer pulled up and called to his man to come to the horse's head. Then they all descended and proceeded on foot.

"Such nonsense!" Mrs. Cowan said snappishly.

"Oh, I ken what ye would be at!" her husband retorted (though probably he was still brooding over the recollection of his having been hooted through the outskirts of Garlieston). "I ken ye would like to show off before the folk, and gang trantling through the town in your ain machine. It's little of the proper humeelity of a Christian that ye care for. But if I have to use a dog-cart in the exercise of my earthly calling, I hope I ken my duty better than to go clattering through the streets wi't, as if I was one o' they tearin', swearin' officers out o' Millhill barracks."

So it was on foot that they arrived at

the Minister's house, whither they had been invited to take tea and spend the evening. Alison, of course, was the young house-mistress ; and she received her guests with the respect and attention due to the farmer's position as an elder—and a very important elder—in the Church ; she had also a kind and encouraging word for the poor lad James, who seemed glad to get away from her, and to subside into a corner, where he sat with his eyes mostly fixed on the floor.

“And how did you enjoy your stay in the Highlands, Miss Blair?” said Mrs. Cowan, who was extremely polite on such occasions.

“Oh, very, very much!” Alison said with a quite unlooked-for enthusiasm. “They are the very nicest and kindest people I have ever met.”

But here the farmer interfered with portentous severity—

“I’m sorry to hear ye say that, Miss Blair—sorry indeed. If ye kenned them better, ye would be of a different opinion, I’m thinking; ye would understand that they are of the same race as the Irish; and they’re a’ tarred wi’ the same stick—a godless, drucken, swearin’, dangerous class o’ people, that are the plague of any decent and respectable community that takes them in. Wha fills the police-courts? Ask the Glesca magistrates! And here in this very town our lives are hardly our ain for they Irish scoondrels frae the pits and the iron-works, a cursin’, drucken, riotous crew, Roman Catholics every one o’ them, and ready to smash every window in your house if they see an orange lily in your gairden. Sometimes I think that it’s a dispensation and a trial that the Lord in His mercy has put upon us—just to remind us what it would be if they blagyards got the upper hand, and could bring the Pope

ower here, and have us burned at the stake for reading the Word. And the Hielanders, as I have heard, are just the same, root and branch, as the Irish—a reckless, quarrelsome, idle crew; and not a word they say to be believed; for the truth is not in them.”

“Have you ever been in the Highlands, Mr. Cowan?” Alison asked sharply—but rather despising herself for caring.

The farmer hesitated, for he had never been in the Highlands; but his wife came to his assistance.

“I’m sure what Alexander says is true,” Mrs. Cowan remarked. “I know that I had a Highland servant once, Miss Blair; and sure I am there never was such another creature born alive. Not but that the woman would work—ay, and get up at any hour; and the strength of a stot she had; but mercy me, her tantrums! Ye had but to check her wi’ a word, and off

she'd go wi' her head in the air, muttering and storming to herself in Gaelic, and making use of language just fit to make your blood creep——”

“But how did you know it was bad language, when you could not understand it?” Alison asked—and she dared not look at her sister Agnes, or she would have burst out laughing.

“I am sure it was bad language—I am confident it was: you could tell it well enough by the sound if not by the sense,” said Mrs. Cowan; and with that oracular utterance this disquisition on the Highland character came to an end, for the buxom and black-eyed wench Katie here opened the door and announced that tea was ready.

Now when they had gone into the dining-room and taken their places, and when the long grace was ended, the farmer's wife ran her eye over the table.

“ I hear, Minister,” said she complacently, “ that in your visiting last week ye included Mrs. Strachan ? ”

The Minister intimated that he had called upon Mrs. Strachan.

“ And she gave ye *blamanj* ? ” continued Mrs. Cowan, with a playful smile.

The Minister had not noticed, or failed to remember.

“ Oh yes, I heard about it,” said Mrs. Cowan, still smiling facetiously. “ And maybe it did not turn out very well ; maybe it was not very well made ? *Blamanj*—Mrs. Strachan : I like that ! Mrs. Strachan trying her hand at *blamanj*—and her mother kept a wee bit box o’ a place in a back-wynd in Airdrie, and sold aipples and ginger-beer ! ”

The incongruity between Mrs. Strachan’s origin and her social pretensions seemed to afford Mrs. Cowan much amusement ; but her husband tacitly rebuked her for

her frivolity by abruptly changing the subject, and showed a better appreciation of the character of the house he was in by reverting to the Minister's forenoon sermon on the previous Sunday.

"I wouldna presume to criticeese, Mr. Blair," said the elder, solemnly and slowly, "and the doctrine o' grace irresistible is not one that any professing Christian would dispute; but yet to lose sight o' works athegither is a sair temptation, I'm feared, to them that are naitrally inclined to back-sliding. Nae doot it is the province o' a minister o' the Gospel to preach the truth as it is delivered to him——"

"Ay, but there's another thing," interposed the elder's wife eagerly. "When our James gets a call, I know he'll put two duties before him—one to preach the truth, and the other to help to sweep away that perneecious stumbling-block, the Estayblished Church."

The farmer went on without heeding this unseemly interruption—

“But I wouldna have the believer grow slack in well-doing. Ye remember what Paul says to the Philippians—‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.’”

“And I am sure you do not forget the very next verse, Mr. Cowan,” the Minister said, calmly regarding his interlocutor from under his shaggy eyebrows. “‘For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.’ You cannot think that mortal man can win such a great prize as eternal salvation by his own weak endeavour?”

“I would just like to hear our James on that point,” again interposed the fond mother. “James is just a wonderfu’ arguer when ye give him time. James, tell them what’s your opinion on that point.”

James, startled out of his apathetic

reverie, looked round him with frightened eyes ; but said nothing. His father took no notice of him whatsoever ; he continued his discourse, now with an appeal *ad rem*.

“ This is what I’m driving at, Mr. Blair,” said he, “ that if the believer is not reminded that works are an outward and visible sign of grace, and demanded of the professing Christian, then he may grow slack in conduct, and do just as others do. Now it’s no more than three days since I was gaun by Steel and Dalrymple’s boiler-works ; and I happened to keek ower the wa’, and there was John Ramsay, jist outside the engine-house where he is employed. Think ye what he was doing ? He had a bit cotton-waste in one hand and an oil-can in the other, and he was puttin drop after drop on to his boots and polishin’ them up. Think o’ that ! what’s that but stealing his employers’ property ? And here’s a man that washes his face,

and puts on his Sabbath clothes, and brings his wife and his twa sons and dochter into the pew wi' him: yet he doesna think twice about stealing his masters' oil to put on his boots. 'Deed, I was thinking o' going into the office and telling them what was going on——"

"I hope you will not do that, Mr. Cowan," said the Minister, in his grave, deliberate way. "It's a small matter; maybe it is the usual custom in the works; and in any case it is too trifling a thing to make mischief about."

"Lax—lax," said the elder, shaking his head mournfully; "it's the little things that lead to great things when they're overlooked. There's the mistress, now: last Sabbath morning she caught one o' the lasses singing away at 'Ye banks and braes'—on a Sabbath morning! and only said 'Be quiet,' or something o' that kind, without a word o' serious remonstrance.

What then? Would ye believe it, Mr. Blair, as I was gaun by the kitchen-door on Wednesday nicht, I just lookit in, and there, as sure as I'm leevin', were the three hizzies playing cards—*playing cards!*”

“Cards, Minister!” almost shrieked Mrs. Cowan (while the guilty Alison sat and listened, thinking of those magical evenings away in the north, with the scent of roses in the garden, and the twilit heavens shining silver-clear over the hills). “Cards!—in a house where there was a minister o’ the Gospel, or one that’s soon to be a minister, ordained and inducted in proper form. James, what was’t ye said about Satan having pented mass-books as well as the Pope? Oh ay, he can give the Romans a slap when he likes! What was’t, James?”

But even with this encouragement James failed to respond, for the eyes of his father

were upon him for a brief moment. Then the elder resumed.

“No, Mr. Blair, I do not hold wi’ them wha say that works are a sinfu’ endeavour to defeat the divine power o’ grace; and I would rather see the professing Christian declare the faith that is in him by outward observances. Six days shalt thou labour; and as long’s I’m master in my own house there’ll be no cloth laid on the Sabbath-day; them that winna tak’ the trouble on the Saturday can gang without their dinner on the Sabbath.”

“Look at Alexander himself, Minister,” said Mrs. Cowan, proudly—she had forgotten for the moment about Garlieston, and the horsewhip, and the empty barn. “Do ye mind the Sabbath morning he came into the church wi’ only the one side o’ his face shaved? Little did he heed the sniggering o’ the young lads and lasses! I say that a man that is shaving

himself on the Saturday night to avoid all labour on the Sabbath, and has to stop in the middle when he hears twelve o'clock striking—a man that is so parteeclar in small things will cling to the essentials as well ; and I hope our James here, though he may rise in the world, and become famous, and get into a different station from ordinary folk like us—I hope he'll be as good a Christian as his father was before him, and no be ashamed to walk in his footsteps."

At this point the Minister, perceiving that tea was over, returned thanks in a long and earnest appeal for further and spiritual mercies ; then the table was cleared, and the small company devoted itself to improving conversation. And at last the doting mother had her chance. Having several times failed to get her son James to open his mouth, she at length worried him into declaring what the subject

of his last manuscript sermon was ; then she appealed to the Minister ; and Mr. Blair was kind enough to examine the young man as to the argument he had followed in that composition, the “ heads ” into which he had divided it, and so forth ; and James was constrained to answer. Mrs. Cowan was a proud woman as she sat and admiringly listened. Nearly all the talking, it is true, was on the side of the Minister ; but was it not a noble spectacle to see those two members of the highest of all professions conversing with each other, and one of them her own son ? She would not allow the farmer to interrupt. When he would have relegated James to the background and his accustomed silence, she valiantly interposed and invoked the aid of the Minister himself. The subject of the sermon was the duty of Christians to make manifest the truth one to another ; there were five “ heads ; ” and

the Minister was most considerate and painstaking in following the line of treatment and in expressing approval where that could be awarded.

(And of all this what did Alison hear? Why, not one word. Her heart was far away in Lochaber. This was not Kirk o' Shields at all—Kirk o' Shields on a dull afternoon deepening into dusk, and the figures in the small parlour become almost as ghosts in the twilight: this is the Doctor's garden, overlooking the shore, and she is standing in it quite alone. Everywhere there is an abundance of motion and change on this bright and windy morning; the far ranges of hills are dappled with yellow sunlight and purple cloud-shadows; torn shreds of white stretch across the pale blue sky; a deeper blue stirs and trembles in the driven water of Loch Linnhe. The flowers are all nodding and bending before the breeze; sometimes a few drops of rain

begin to mark the lilac-gray pebbles at her feet; sometimes there is a brief gloom overhead; then the bit of a shower drifts over; the warm sunshine spreads itself around; the petals of the flowers are glittering now, and the pendulous branches of the willows rustling; while the air is freshened with the scent of rain-wet roses and sweetbrier. What is this she hears? The window of Flora's room above her is open; perchance, for it is yet early, her cousin is combing out her long coal-black hair as she lightly sings—

“O where hae ye been roaming, roaming, roaming,
O where hae ye been roaming, my bonny Mary
Graham?”

And Ludovick—why does not Ludovick put in an appearance, coming along from the town by the white road that skirts the beach? They should be going sailing on so fair a morning. Has she the courage to cut a rose for him—one of those deep

red ones, with rain diamonds on its closely folded petals—and to offer it to him as he comes in at the little gate? Flora would laugh, perhaps; but he would be proud enough. Ah, no, she has not the courage; she must not make confession; the white road is empty; and the day somehow changes in this wistful dream. There are dark clouds overhead now; and there are hurrying people at the quay; and a wild agony of farewell, and streaming eyes, and an aching heart. “Lochaber no more,” the restless winds are wailing; “we’ll maybe return to Lochaber no more.” The black wall of mountains comes between; the fair and joyous garden-land, with all its new wonders and gladnesses of life, with all its secret hopes and thrills, is lost to her for ever; there remains for her but a bewildering memory, and the hopeless desolation of Kirk o’ Shields. These voices in the small parlour convey nothing to her.

She is wondering what Flora is doing ; what Hugh is doing ; whether either of them ever thinks of her. And Ludovick ? —perhaps there is a letter already on its way to her, with some word of kindness, of remembrance.)

Late in the evening the Corbieslaw people rose to go ; and then it was, on her retiring to put on her bonnet and shawl, that the farmer's wife had an opportunity of talking to Alison alone. But Mrs. Cowan had a wholesome opinion of her own shrewdness, and considered that she knew a great deal better than her husband how to conduct this delicate negotiation. She had no intention of telling Alison that she ought to marry James for the greater good of the Free Church of Scotland, and in order to strengthen the elder's position in her father's congregation. That was not the kind of lure with which to captivate the imagination of a young maiden. She

relied rather on the abundant store of napery at Corbieslaw, of which she kept an accurate list in her mind. But before coming to that, she had to make some kind of apology for her vicarious interference.

“Ye see, Miss Blair,” she said, when she had introduced the subject in a skilful and diplomatic manner, “a young probationer is naturally timid when he comes to a minister’s house ; and as for yourself, you are much looked-up to by the whole congregation ; and James is a modest lad, and maybe does not think of himself just what he might ; so that if I speak for him ye’ll no misunderstand his hanging back a little.”

“I think if he was very anxious he would speak for himself,” Alison observed, with much composure ; “so wouldn’t it be better to say nothing more about it ?”

“No, no ; don’t put it off like that, and

do the lad an injury because he is modest and well-behaved," the fond mother pleaded. "It's not the glib ones that can talk your head off that make the best and steadiest husbands. Of course he'll speak to you himself; but I thought I would like to have just a bit chat wi' ye; for it would be a great comfort to us to know that Corbieslaw would be well looked after when we are gone, even if ye sold the lease o' the farm, and only kept the house. I couldna bear to think of my store o' napery being put to the roup and scattered among other folks' drawers and presses. Just consider this, Miss Blair——"

Here followed an imposing catalogue to which Alison duly listened—and not without interest, indeed, for she was a house-mistress herself.

"Ye see, it is not as if ye were being asked to marry a young man with his way in the world to make," continued Mrs.

Cowan, "and nothing to back him. I'm sure enough in my own mind that James will take a high position in the Church, for he is well grounded in the Latin and Greek, ay, and Hebrew too, and he's just that convincing when he brings his logic to bear ; but in the mean time, while he is waiting, his father and myself will see that he doesna want. An only son too—I suppose ye hardly remember his brother Andrew, that was to have had the farm, poor lad, but was taken away in that terrible veesitation of diphtheria ? Ay, he was a bonny boy, my poor Andrew ; but he never had James's head ; ye'll see what James will come to some day, Miss Blair : he'll make folk talk about him, I'm thinking."

"I'm sure I hope so, if that is his ambition," said Alison ; "but really, Mrs. Cowan, I don't see why I should be expected to marry Mr. James, or anybody else."

“Your father is an old man, Miss Blair,” said the farmer’s wife, significantly.

“I trust he may live for many years yet,” Alison said, “but even if anything were to happen to him, I suppose I could earn my own living, like other people.”

“How? Ye’ve been gently brought up, Miss Blair,” her monitress continued. “I wouldna like to see you slaving away at needlework, or teaching, or whatever a young lady could turn her hand to.”

“I’m not afraid,” Alison said, simply enough. “And anyhow I’d rather do that than marry in order to be well provided for.”

“Not if it was your father’s wish?—if he wanted to see you comfortably settled?”

Alison was perceptibly startled.

“Why, who said that?” she demanded.

And here Mrs. Cowan not only followed, but considerably bettered, her husband’s instructions, and allowed her fancy a little

range in interpreting the Minister's hopes and wishes in this matter. Alison was surprised ; but she had no reason to disbelieve ; for there was but little mutual confidence between her father and herself ; and indeed this was about the last subject that either of them would have mentioned to the other. Alison was surprised, no doubt ; but she was not alarmed ; in fact, when, after some further representations and persuasions from the farmer's wife, they both of them returned to the parlour, Alison could hardly help regarding with a mild curiosity the young man whom they all seemed to wish her to marry. She felt no dislike to him at all ; there was rather in her breast a kind of wonder ; and when she shook hands with him at the door, as they were going away, she glanced at him again with not a little interest : was this her possible husband, then ?

When she got back into her own small

room, to think over this project, she was rather amused than disconcerted by it. It was too ludicrous to be possible. Wandering about her head was the proud fancy that if the whole congregation were banded together in a conspiracy to make her marry this poor lad of a probationer, she would be safe enough, for Ludovick Macdonell would come to rescue her. Nay, she could imagine the simple ceremonial about to begin; friends and relatives assembled in the largest room in her father's house; she and this poor lad, far more tremulous than herself, standing side by side; the Minister confronting them, and about to lecture them on the duties of wedded life. But behold! the door opens; Ludovick appears—regarding these people as if amazed at their astounding insolence; he parts them right and left with his broad shoulders as he makes his way to her; there is a laugh of recognition when he

meets her eyes ; he seizes her hand, and, without a word or a glance to any one but herself, leads her away.

Leads her away—but whither, and to what end? And indeed she might have proceeded to ask herself what Ludovick could have to do with her at all, seeing that in her own mind she had already composed an answer to the letter which every morning she now expected to receive from him.

CHAPTER III.

HITHER AND THITHER.

THIS answer that she had already constructed was pitilessly clear and logical; and was designed to convince him that difference of creed put an insurmountable barrier between them, and that he would best consult the happiness of both by abandoning forthwith what could only prove a futile fancy. But all the while that she was formulating this argument (during many an anxious and silent hour, that caused her sister Agnes to wonder why Alison should have come back from the Highlands so preoccupied and thoughtful) she could not conceal from herself

that it was based, not so much upon any convictions of her own, as upon the convictions of her friends and relatives, and of the people among whom she lived. For what was her own attitude towards the Catholic Church, when she came to consider it dispassionately, and as she strove to free herself from those mists of prejudice in which she had been brought up? In former days, when she had been first alarmed by Paley's "Evidences," she had sought refuge in authority. Who was she, she naturally asked herself, to set up her private judgment, and question truths that had been accepted by those who had devoted their whole lives to the investigation of these supreme matters? What learning, or knowledge, or critical faculty had she, that she should question, for example, the conclusions arrived at by the Westminster Assembly of Divines? And now, when she came to regard the Catholic

faith, if authority was to be her safeguard and chief good, what more august authority could she find than in the religion that had held Christendom for century after century, dowered with the majesty of unbroken tradition, and ever ready to receive into its haven any poor wandering soul that had been tossed about on the seas of perplexity and doubt? In that haven the greatest intellects of many lands had found security and rest and consolation: why should she hesitate to believe what they had believed? No, it was not her own attitude towards the Catholic Church that caused her answer to Ludovick Macdonell to shape itself so clearly into a refusal; it was the knowledge that if she married a Catholic, her nearest relations would be shocked to the heart, her friends and acquaintances would consider her as one abandoned and lost, while the congregation that sat and listened to her father's preach-

ing from Sabbath to Sabbath would be astounded that the Minister should have been so failing in his private duties as to allow one of his own household to stray away into the camp of the enemy.

And yet when Ludovick Macdonell's letter did arrive she tore it open in haste and glanced over its contents with a breathless anxiety. To her extreme surprise she found there was nothing argumentative or polemical in it; he appeared to have taken it for granted that that was all gone and finished—that the representations he had made to her in the railway-carriage would prove to be sufficient when she had time to consider them calmly; and now his appeal was all to her heart instead of to her head. Certainly he did once revert to the fact of their belonging to different faiths, or to different versions of the same faith, but only to repeat what he had said before, that in these days of

religious toleration and of individual liberty difference of creed was a wholly minor matter, that need never dislocate the relations between two persons who otherwise were at one. He did not seem in the least to understand the situation in which she found herself placed. All he wanted was that she should say yes, and forthwith and joyfully he would begin to make preparations at Oyre for the reception of the bride. What more simple? His father would be delighted, he said. He had put his hopes and plans before the old gentleman, who, he confessed, was at first inclined to rebel, for there had been another project in his mind ; but the Herr Papa was won over at last, was forced to admit that he had been greatly charmed with the young lady who had visited Oyre that autumn, and finally said, " Bring her home as soon as you like, Ludovick, and I will take the rooms overlooking the

kitchen-garden, so that practically you'll have the whole house to yourselves."

"But that's not my scheme at all," continued Captain Ludovick. "Fancy, now, this morning I had to go out in search of my pa, having some business to talk over; and where do you think I found him? All by himself up at the edge of the plantations, engaged in clearing the dried leaves and weeds out of the surface-drains with his stick—you remember the stick with the panther's claw set in silver? That's a fine occupation for the old laird of Oyre, isn't it? But I could imagine something much better than that for him. I could imagine him, on a warm afternoon, walking up and down the little avenue, under the shade of the sycamores; a young lady with him and clinging to his arm—a very pretty young lady, with the clearest and kindest of gray eyes, and the demurest of dimples in her

cheek, and the most bewitching smile, and dark hair so neatly and nicely braided under a white Tam o' Shanter—and him telling her splendid and awful lies about the jungle, and her listening and believing every word, and pleasing him mightily. Can you guess who she was? I could see her quite clearly. Yes, and I could see Flora and Hugh come driving up in a dog-cart, and get down with their rackets in their hands; then the young lady in the white Tam o' Shanter must needs fly away and get a cigar, and the *Inverness Courier*, and some whiskey and water for the old gentleman, and put them on a small table in front of the house; and then she joined the others, all determined to get three sets of tennis played before going in to dinner. And if the old gentleman, in the heat of the afternoon, let his cigar go out, and fell asleep behind the newspaper, at all events he was in good

company, and more comfortably occupied than in pottering about all by himself and clearing dried leaves out of drains."

Alison turned from this letter with a sigh, and took up its fellow that had arrived by the same post. It was from Flora—sent at Ludovick's urgent request. And it was written in a very different key, for Flora seemed to perceive a great deal more clearly than the headstrong lover the difficulties with which Alison was surrounded, though, to be sure, she made light of them also, in her happy-go-lucky fashion.

"DEAR ALISON,

"I hate you. You have turned the best fellow in the world into a bore. I try to shunt him on to Hugh, who is quite sympathetic and agrees; for I am not sympathetic and don't agree, and decline to believe that you are the most wonderful creature that ever came into this

wearyfu' world. However, that's neither here nor there. My lord has given me his orders. I am to write at once and convince you that there is nothing to hinder a Protestant and a Catholic from marrying each other. He says you didn't know he was a Catholic until the very day you left—when he played us that pretty trick by cutting across through the Black Mount Forest—and that you seemed quite upset by the discovery. But what does it amount to, if you two pretty dears really care for each other? Here's my solution of the difficulty. If you think that husband and wife must necessarily be of the same faith, why don't both of you agree to join the Church of England, which is a nice, convenient, Half-way House between Protestantism and Catholicism? Isn't that sensible? At the same time I see no reason why you shouldn't marry and remain Protestant and Catholic

just as you are ; I don't believe the difference would come into your actual lives at all ; and there's one very certain thing, you need have no fear about the priests interfering with your domestic affairs or relations. Oh no ; my worshipful gentleman has a *tolerably stiff neck* ; and he has a kind of notion that his house is to be his own, and himself undisputed master of it. There won't be any cowed monk coming out from a sliding panel at Oyre, or any kind of foreign dictation or interference, you may depend on that. Indeed, so far as your being a Protestant and his being a Catholic is concerned, I don't see why there should be any trouble at all—any more than the same difference affected your friendly relations with him when you were here, and when you didn't even guess at its existence—and if you were only to consider your two selves, everything would be clear enough.

“ But oh, Alison Blair, when I think of you forsaking all the preachings and teachings of your forefathers, and bidding defiance to the amazement and horror and bewailing of your friends and family, then it’s quite another matter ; and I’m not going to advise you, however Ludovick may beg and implore. For he doesn’t understand, and that’s the truth, or else he’s so headstrong that he won’t pay any heed. My goodness, the ghosts of all the Blairs of Moss-end would rise from their graves, and point their snaky finger at you, and sing psalms of lamentation (tune, *Coleshill*). And then the congregation, and the elders, and the elders’ wives, and Agnes too—what would she say ? Your joining hands at the Half-way House would be no kind of concession to them. What ? the daughter of Mr. Blair of East Street Church gone away and become an Episcopalian !—you might just as well

become a Catholic at once. Of course, Ludovick won't hear of all this, but I know more than he does about the Free Kirk folk here—I hear plenty about them from my father; and if you mean to do this thing, you will have to pull yourself together to face the consequences.

“ Well, now, my dear Miss Dimity, this is all I have to say by way of warning, and I've freed my conscience. No doubt it has all been present to your own mind; for you know the conditions far better than I do, and no doubt you have been considering. But at the same time I must honestly tell you that if this affair between Ludovick and you is *very, very* serious—and he *appears* to take it seriously—I wouldn't be frightened of these dire consequences, if I were in your position. No, I wouldn't. If I cared for a man, I wouldn't pay much attention to what the East Street elders and their wives said about either him or

me. But then I should have to care for him *a good lot*, and if your interesting little entanglement with Captain Ludovick was only a bit of summer flirtation—natural enough too, for he's very good-looking and good-natured, and quite as clever as you want a man to be, for you don't want them to be *too sharp*—well, you'd save yourself a great deal of trouble if you'd drop it at once. When men get an idea into their head, they hold on to it; and they never see a joke, or take a hint, they're so frightfully serious; and in fact Ludovick is so completely *entêté* that I was afraid to suggest to him that perhaps you had only been having a little fun. Only a *perhaps*, my dear; and after all I don't think that is your line; but you kept so very quiet about it that Ludovick considerably astonished me when he came to me with his full-blown confession. And I hope I did not hurt your feelings by anything I said

on board the steamer when you were leaving Fort William. I thought you looked rather cut up; and I really did think Ludovick was treating you shabbily, after the attention he had paid you; so I thought I would restore your nerve by giving you a good, wholesome dose of worldly wisdom. Did I say anything that too fearfully shocked your sensitive soul? At all events, if I uttered a single word against that incomparable man-creature, Captain Ludovick, I hereby withdraw it, and make my humble apology on my two bended knees, and will never do so again.

“That’s all. At present I prefer to keep a neutral attitude, in spite of Mr. Ludovick’s fine speeches. I would advise you to consult Aunt Gilchrist before doing anything serious. At one time I know she entertained the idea that Ludovick was the scheming son of an impecunious old Highland laird, and that both of them

were conspiring to improve their impoverished estate with her money; but perhaps that was a passing whim of Periphery. Anyway, you won't do anything without consulting her—if she's going to give you the money that ought to come to me, you cat!

“I suppose you were already revelling in dreams of future wealth when you went and tipped that horrid boy Johnny? Do you know what he did? His first exploit wasn't so bad; he merely got his photograph taken—for threepence; and when I said it was very like him, he chose to grin a very sarcastic grin, and say, ‘Oh, they can mek anybody look pretty, them things!’ giving me to understand that he was far above being vain of his personal appearance. But with part of the rest of the money the fiend bought an old flint-pistol and now you are never safe for five minutes—there's a *bang* just close behind

you, and you jump up to find that John has been firing at a cat for scratching up the garden, he says. But I know better. It's because he thinks they do him mischief when they turn to witches ; and he wants to take them unawares when they are only cats. Master John has been so kind as to ask more than once about your health and general welfare.

“ Now good-bye. I consider this *is* a letter ; and that you're greatly indebted to me.

“ Your affectionate cousin,

“ FLORA.

“ P.S.—Let me know ; and don't forget about Aunt Gilchrist. Although you have robbed me, I don't bear you any ill-will.”

Alison read this long epistle twice through, and with an ever-increasing gratitude, for she easily recognized the

aim of it. It was all meant to give her courage. If she said yes, then she was to face the consequences with a stout heart, and with the assurance that difference of creed was not such a terrible thing after all ; if she said no, then a summer flirtation was a thing to be easily forgotten, and nobody the worse. A good deal of the careless gaiety of the letter, Alison could see, was assumed for this very purpose of cheering her up in the difficult position in which she found herself : otherwise she might have been a little surprised by its apparent lack of womanly sympathy. Yet she could hear Flora's voice in it all the way through ; and it was an honest voice, frank and straightforward, and most well-intentioned and friendly. And perhaps she could not help envying her cousin her confidence and high spirits, and admiring them too : light-heartedness of that kind was not a common thing in Kirk o' Shields.

But not for a moment did she hesitate about the answer she was to send to Ludovick Macdonell, though, to be sure, when she came to put it down on paper, it did not seem to be quite so conclusive as when she had argued it out in her own mind. There seemed something wanting. She grew to think that, if she wrote a hundred letters, she would never get him to understand the atmosphere in which she had been brought up, nor the opinions and sentiments of the people by whom she was surrounded. To him it did not seem to matter whether a human being was a Catholic or a Protestant; to them far smaller things, both as regards doctrine and practice, were of vital and transcendent importance, as affecting nothing less than their eternal salvation. Nay, she told him frankly that, although she might reason herself into his way of thinking, it could hardly be expected that she should have

been brought up all her life to hear Roman Catholics described as dangerous enemies, and Jesuits, and persecutors, and the Roman Catholic Church denounced as the Mother of Iniquity and the arch-plotter against men's lives and liberties, without imbibing some kind of prejudice. The Roman Catholics in Kirk o' Shields were the Irish labourers in the iron-works, and they were a terror to the rest of the population. If a priest were seen in the streets, the children would leave the pavement to let him pass, and look after him with fear on their faces. The Roman Catholics were popularly believed to be capable of committing any crime, for all they had to do was to go and purchase absolution; and were supposed to be secretly looking forward to the overthrow of the Protestant Church and the revival of heretic-burning. Foxe's "Book of Martyrs" was in every other cottage, side by side with the Bible; and the

imagination of children, from their earliest years, was stirred by hideous pictures of the sufferers tied to the stake and writhing among flames, with a scowling priest looking on, and pressing a crucifix on the sight of the dying man. And even if she could effectually clear her mind of the results of all this training, she would have to remember that her immediate relations and friends regarded Roman Catholics with an aversion and mistrust which they might possibly find it difficult to explain ; while, as for the bulk of her father's congregation, they would regard her as having done something worse than merely imperil her own soul, as having betrayed a high trust, and brought disgrace on a family long renowned for its piety and its devoted constancy to the true faith.

This, or something like this, she hinted to him as clearly and yet as gently as she

could ; and then she read the letter over and over again, feeling more and more that it was useless, that he would not understand, that he would not accept it as a reason for her refusal. Nay, she began to imagine, as she brooded over these inadequate sentences, that if at this very moment she were in Lochaber, she would not be thinking in this fashion at all. What she had written seemed cold and narrow ; seemed to be raking up an obsolete and despicable bigotry and intolerance ; to have no honest concern with any human being's life. Oh, for one of those bright and clear and buoyant days, with a brisk wind ruffling the blue waters of Loch Linnhe, with the sun hot on the garden-flowers, and on the gray beach with its yellow fringe of sea-weed, with Flora laughing, and Hugh listening amused, and Ludovick begging of them to hurry down to the boat : she would not be thinking

this way at all ! But here, amidst a gloom of smoke and rain, with the incessant mournful throb and murmur of the iron-works all around her, and opposite her, visible through the streaming panes, the sombre black walls and closed door of East Street Free Church, all the future seemed hopeless enough, and her heart was heavy, and she knew not how to say good-bye in a simple and natural way. For what was the use of considering these narrow prejudices, these ignorant bigotries, these contemptible aversions and suspicions, when all she had to say was good-bye ? She tore up the paper, and went to the rain-beaten window and stood there, gazing blankly out into the wet street.

But this thing had to be done, and the sooner the better ; so she resolutely went back to her desk again, and wrote as follows :—

“DEAR LUDOVICK,

“It cannot be. I think Flora will be able to tell you better than I can. I had written a long letter to you, but it seemed so heartless, and I don’t want you to think me that. If you knew how I am situated, you would understand how this must be the last word, and I am sure, when I ask you, you will accept it as such. If we should ever meet again, I hope you will let me be always to you what I should like to consider myself now—your sister and friend.

“ALISON.”

She cried a little ; but when she had put the letter in an envelope and addressed it, and got the maid-servant, under shelter of an umbrella, to carry it to the post-office, her heart felt considerably lighter. It was over and done with now ; she had to face the future as best she might ; and

in time she hoped this episode in her life would come to be regarded only as a kind of pleasant fancy, something to be remembered with a certain wistful tenderness, perhaps, but without any too serious pang.

Meanwhile she set about her busy and multifarious duties, as house-mistress, as member of the Dorcas Society, as Sunday-school teacher, and all the rest of it, with a cheerful assiduity, convinced that this was the surest way towards forgetfulness. That was all she wanted now. Of her own accord she had locked the door of the Beautiful Land and thrown away the key. Here were her true interests and cares—superintending her father's household, taking her share of the charitable work that was going, and making herself agreeable to the members of the congregation. She tried to think the best of them, and of their narrow views and rather

mean and envious dispositions. They were what nature and circumstances had made them, she strove to remember. Their wretched, spiteful little tittle-tattle, especially directed against any one who was in any way prominent or prosperous, was perhaps but a pathetic confession of inferiority, or perhaps, on the other hand, it served as a check upon vainglory and pretence. One thing she always could and did respect about them, and that was the earnestness and sincerity of their faith. There was no make-believe about that. If they were rather inclined to dwell on the fact that the rest of the human race were on the broad road to perdition, that was merely what they had been taught. And if their temperaments were sombre and melancholy even to moroseness, what else could be expected as the result of their stern repression of all human affections, of their rigid renunciation of all

natural enjoyment, of that routine of monotonous and grimy toil, of sordid cares and anxieties, amid surroundings plague-stricken of smoke and ashes and gloom ?

Sometimes, when the two sisters had a quiet evening to themselves, Alison would sit and discourse of all the wonderful things she had seen during her stay in the north, and of the kindness of the people there ; and Agnes had a vivid imagination, and could easily construct pictures out of what she heard. She had only seen her cousins Flora and Hugh on one occasion, and then they rather overawed this shy little lass, for they talked (as she imagined) beautiful English, and they had fine clothes, and a freedom of manner with which she was quite unaccustomed. They remained strangers to her—creatures belonging to a different sphere ; but she could well understand how her sister Alison, who was so capable and clever in all ways, and used

to be treated with respect, could go among them, and not only hold her own, but be welcomed as an equal and friend. But of all the people that Agnes heard of, the one she was most interested in was Captain Macdonell; and indeed she heard a great deal about him, for Alison was schooling herself in this direction, and was making believe to herself that she could talk about him without any heart-tremor whatsoever. To Agnes the young Highland laird seemed the very heart and soul of all this wonderful life that her sister was describing—to be the central figure in all these imaginative pictures; and she was naturally curious about him.

“Was he so very handsome, Ailie?” she said thoughtfully, on one occasion.

“Handsome!” said Alison, but with her face suddenly mantling red. “What has handsomeness to do with it? You would never think of his being handsome if you

were with him; you would think of his happy disposition, and of his being able to do anything that was wanted, and of the way he seems to make the people round him pleased and light-hearted."

"Yes," said Agnes (apparently still contemplating her imaginary hero), "that is ever so much better, isn't it, Ailie—to have a nice disposition than to be good-looking? Of course I thought he was good-looking; I don't know why; but now I can fancy him all you say, and quite plain as well——"

"But I never said he was plain, Agnes," Alison said, with her face burning redder than ever. "No, not *plain*. I only said it wasn't his good looks you would think of first, or make the most of; but if it came to that—well, I—I think he is the handsomest and manliest-looking man I ever saw."

"Is he? Is he really?" Agnes ex-

claimed, with her eyes wide. "Oh, I think that's far pleasanter to think about ! And I was sure he was handsome, somehow ; tell me exactly what he is like, Ailie !"

But this Alison, who was greatly embarrassed, managed to evade ; and in order to escape from her invidious position she wandered off into a description of the general appearance of the young Highlanders she had met, especially of the manner in which they turned out their feet in walking, giving them a certain proud step and air. But Agnes was still thinking.

"Is he going to marry Flora ?" she asked.

Alison started somewhat ; but instantly she recollected that that had been her own natural deduction from the intimacy she had found existing between Ludovick Macdonell and the Munroes.

“ I don't know,” she answered absently ;
“ perhaps he may some day.”

During these confidences Alison scrupulously avoided all mention of what had happened between herself and Captain Macdonell. That was all over and done with, she argued ; it was as nothing now ; it had only to be forgotten. Besides, she knew that Agnes would be inexpressibly shocked at the prospect of her sister marrying a Roman Catholic, and what was the use of alarming her, now that the possibility no longer existed ? In all these recitals of her adventures in the north, Ludovick figured merely as the light-hearted companion, the master-spirit of their expeditions, the ever considerate brother and friend. Agnes sat and listened with a vivid fancy that magnified and glorified. She heard of the wonders of the dawn flaming along the crests of the mountains of Lochiel and Ardgour ; she

could see the bright-coloured garden, the white road, the shore, the calm loch, and Hugh's sailing-boat lying at her moorings ; she went fishing with them on those magical twilit evenings, while the northern glow hung high in the heavens far into the night ; she went climbing with them up the sterile altitudes of Ben Nevis, with all the land below in darkness, and Hugh and Flora singing—

*“ The stars are all burning cheerily, cheerily,
Ho ro, Mairi dhu, turn to me !
The sea-mew is mourning drearily, drearily,
Ho ro, Mairi dhu, turn to me ! ”*

She even transformed poor Johnny into a Scandinavian troll, possessed of supernatural gifts, and holding mysterious converse with the unseen powers. Aunt Gilchrist became a beneficent fairy god-mother—for Alison had rather glossed over those little attacks of temper that were really the result of peripheral rheumatism. And one evening she said—

"Well, they seem to have been very kind to you, Ailie, and to have made much of you; and surely they cannot have forgotten you already. Have you not heard from any of them?"

"Oh yes, I had a letter from Flora," Alison answered; and then she honestly added, after a moment's hesitation, "and one from Captain Macdonell."

"I wish you had shown it to me," the younger sister said unsuspectingly. "It would be like hearing him speak; and you get to understand people better that way. Did you answer them?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Well, I hope you let them know you were sensible of their kindness to you. For I think you are sometimes too stiff, Ailie, and dignified—but perhaps that's only with some people."

"Not with them, anyway," Alison said promptly. "You couldn't be stiff with them."

So the days went by ; and she strove to put her whole heart and mind into the duties and occupations immediately surrounding her ; and she hoped that ere long she would be able to regard the time she had spent in Lochaber as a tale that had been told. Still, sometimes, and in spite of her strenuous endeavours at forgetfulness, she wondered that he had not sent the briefest line or word in acknowledgment of her letter. It needed no reply, certainly—nay, she had begged of him to accept it as the last word between them. He was only obeying her own injunctions in remaining silent. No doubt he knew, with herself, that that was best. Nevertheless, at odd moments, when some wandering fancy had gone straying back to the Highlands, she said to herself that surely he might have written just a line to say that her letter had been received. That would involve nothing. She wanted

to know that he was not offended with her ; that they were still friends. More than once she caught herself thinking too long about this matter, and growing sick at heart, so that tears would steal into her eyes when she was alone ; and then she would get angry with herself, and dry her eyelashes with a proud impatience, and set to work more resolutely than ever at all those things that were expected of the Minister's daughter. Her sister did not even suspect.

One morning Alison happened to be alone in the house, save for the maid-servant Katie ; and she was in her own room, busy with some dress-making performance. She heard the bell ring below, but paid little heed, for there were a good many callers at the Minister's house, and Katie would simply have to tell the visitor that Mr. Blair was not at home. Presently, however, the buxom, black-eyed lass

appeared, and informed her young mistress that a gentleman wished to see her. Even then Alison was not surprised, for it was a common thing for members of the congregation to leave messages with her.

“Who is it?” she said carelessly.

Katie looked round about her on the floor.

“He gied me a caird, miss, but I maun hae left it below.”

“Oh, never mind,” Alison said; and with much composure she went downstairs and opened the parlour door.

And then she stood transfixed, the colour suddenly forsaking her face, her fingers tightly grasping the door-handle. For the stranger was no other than Ludovick Macdonell — Ludovick Macdonell, with very visible satisfaction and kindness shining in his eyes; and betraying no kind of hesitation or embarrassment whatever on finding himself in Kirk o’

Shields, and in the Minister's parlour, with Alison confronting him and almost shrinking back from his frankly out-stretched hand.

CHAPTER IV.

A VISITOR.

“ALISON!” he said in a tone of remonstrance, and he went boldly forward and seized the hand that quite unconsciously she seemed inclined to withhold from him. For whither had fled all her clear reasonings about Catholicism, and her conviction that she at least was free from the common prejudices amid which she had been brought up? His sudden appearance had startled her into her other self. She only knew—in a kind of rapid bewilderment—that here was a dangerous person come into her father’s house; that she might be accused of harbouring an enemy; that she

had concealed from her people the fact that this Ludovick Macdonell, with whom she had been on more than friendly terms, was a Roman Catholic; and that, unless he could be got away instantly, a terrible discovery would ensue. The young man looked at her with surprise, and with a sort of good-humoured reproach: what could he, with his happy-go-lucky assurance, know of these vague and wild alarms?

“Alison,” he said, “you don’t seem very glad to see me. I suppose I should have written to tell you I was coming. Of course you knew why I did not answer your letter; I saw that writing was of no use; I thought it better to wait until I could see yourself; and so here I am. But I hope I haven’t put you about——”

“Oh no, Captain Macdonell—no——” she stammered.

He dropped her hand in wonderment.

“Captain Macdonell!” he exclaimed.
“It was ‘Ludovick’ in your letter——”

“Yes,” she said, rather breathlessly.
“Yes—I—I was writing hurriedly—and—it was like saying good-bye—and perhaps I did not notice.”

(And all the while her heart, that was beating quickly enough, was longing to cry aloud to him, “Oh, if we two were only in Lochaber, I could speak to you there; but here I cannot speak to you; here there are people who would shudder to think that a Roman Catholic had made his way into the Minister’s house, and was talking alone with the Minister’s daughter: if only we two were in Lochaber, it would be all different then!”)

“Alison!” said he, “aren’t you going to ask me to sit down?”

This somewhat recalled her to her senses.

“I beg your pardon,” she said, with the

colour mantling in her face ; and she shut the door behind her, and went forward to the window, where there chanced to be two chairs conveniently placed. " But it was such a surprise to find you here——"

" Oh yes," he said, in a very kindly fashion (for he was not one to take offence readily). " And of course I should have written. Or I should have waited till the afternoon ; but the fact is as soon as I got into the town I was so anxious to make sure you were here that I came along at once. And you needn't be afraid, Alison ; I'm not going to plague you. I only wanted to see yourself, to tell you that I went to Flora, as you asked me, and she explained to me your probable reasons for saying no. But, Alison, they weren't reasons at all ! If other people delight in fighting over sectarian differences, and in making their theological squabbles so many little gods to be worshipped, what

has that got to do with you and me? Here I am; there you are; why should there be interposed between us this impalpable stuff that doesn't concern us? If you yourself were a bigot, I could understand it; but you are not; and why should you let the bigotry of other people interfere between you and me? Of course," he said, altering his tone and speaking with much less confidence, "you will see what I am assuming. I am assuming that this is your only reason for saying no. Tell me, Alison—tell me honestly—supposing I were a member of your church, you might then be persuaded to say yes?"

Her eyes were downcast.

"My people would have no objections against you then," she said, in rather a low voice.

"But that is not it," he urged, though quite gently. "You yourself—what would you say?"

Her voice was lower still.

“What is the use of speaking of it?” was all she said—but it was the tell-tale colour in her face that was for him sufficient answer.

He rose and took her hand, and held it for a moment ; there was a proud and kind look in his eyes.

“I’m not going to press you further, Alison. I know enough now. You have told me quite enough ; and now you must leave me to conquer all these tremendous difficulties that you seem to think so formidable. And first of all,” he continued, in a very cheerful fashion, “I’m coming along this afternoon to show your father and your sister that I’m not a desperate man-eating ogre ; that’s what I’ve got to do.”

Now she had gradually grown accustomed to the sound of his voice ; and his very presence seemed to have lent her

something of his own happy self-confidence ; but this abrupt proposal recalled her first alarms, and she looked up startled.

“ Oh yes,” said he—and she could not help admiring the robust unconscious audacity he exhibited, even while she looked forward to this contemplated interview with a good deal of dismay—“ that is the best plan, to show yourself and give people an opportunity of judging what you are. The housemaid told me your father would be in about four o’clock. I asked for him first—no, don’t be frightened!—not to say anything serious—only to say that I knew relatives of his in the Highlands, and that I had met you there, and that I wanted to make his acquaintance, as I happened to be in the neighbourhood. Will your sister be in then too ? ”

“ Oh yes,” said Alison, though she was still rather aghast. “ Agnes will be back

for dinner at two o'clock, and will be in all the afternoon."

"So much the better," said the young man, who seemed very well content after having received that assurance from Alison's downcast face. "I want your sister to be on my side; and I think I shall be able to manage that. But how I am to get at the whole congregation—how I am to win over the elders' wives—I don't quite see at present; and Flora seemed to fancy you would consider their opinion as of some importance. I shouldn't have thought so myself; but still, perhaps you know best. Well, good-bye just now, Alison; you have made me very happy, though you have not said much; and I'm not going to torment you into saying more; I'm well content to wait."

So presently he was gone; and she was once more alone, and entirely confused and disconcerted by this bold and unexpected

intrusion. She could not understand it at all as yet. Mechanically she began to put things straight about the little parlour—wondering if he had paid any attention to these small matters ; and she was mortified to think that she had that very morning postponed putting up clean curtains until the following day. Then she went to the mirror over the mantelpiece, and rather anxiously smoothed her hair—as if that were of any use now. Moreover, her mind was all in a turmoil about his forthcoming visit in the afternoon : as to how Agnes would regard him ; as to how her father would receive him ; what he might think of the family as a whole. These were the immediate things that concerned her : as for his arguments, if arguments they could be called, she paid little heed to them. He had not in the least upset her conviction that it was all over between them : she understood what he could not be

brought to understand ; and there was an end to that. But she thought of Oyre, and of the old laird there, and of his great kindness and courtesy and gentleness to her, a stranger ; and she hoped that Ludovick would bear away with him no unpleasant impression of her family and of her friends if he should happen to meet any of them. And then she remembered having seen in a certain shop-window a very neat small collar—an upstanding collar, blue-striped, such as those Flora was used to wear ; and she thought she would quickly slip out and purchase that little bit of adornment before Agnes should be home for dinner.

But this town of Kirk o' Shields seemed now to be full of all kinds of sudden surprises and bewilderments. She had not put on her bonnet and left the house over a couple of minutes when she found herself once more confronted by Captain Ludovick,

who was coming sauntering along the pavement, staring about him as if he were owner of the whole place. And while his eyes lighted up with pleasure at sight of her, it was with the greatest coolness that he inquired whither she was going, and proceeded to walk with her in that direction. To be going along the main street of Kirk o' Shields, with Ludovick Macdonell by her side—this was a strange thing; and she hoped she was giving coherent answers to his many questions, for she felt that the eyes of all the neighbours were upon her; and she was profoundly grateful to him for affecting to take a friendly interest in this small town. She did not understand that his friendly interest, his more than friendly interest, was due to the fact that this was her birth-place; that he was regarding these squalid pavements only to think that now and again she had to trip along them; and that

it was the influence of Alison's own eyes that caused his eyes to see something very fine and picturesque in the white masses of steam intertwisting themselves among the darker clouds of smoke. She was forlornly saying to herself that she had never seen Kirk o' Shields look so squalid and grimy ; while he, on the other hand, was declaring that there was a distinct glimmering of sunlight that would soon break through the murky skies. And when they came to a certain large frontage—a large frontage it seemed among these small two-storied houses of dirty gray—she was quite ashamed. This had been a theatre—the only effort at gaiety ever made in Kirk o' Shields ; and now the windows were all broken and battered in, and the dismal walls were plastered over with rain-beaten and bedraggled placards, and the words of the Royal License over the doorway were no longer to be made out by mortal eyes.

“Poor devils!” said Macdonell, contemplating this sorry sight, “the last lot who had to forsake that place must have had a bad time of it; for a provincial company will hold on so long as there’s a single penny coming into the treasury.”

“Please don’t say anything about it to my father,” Alison hinted rather anxiously. “They are rather proud of having shut up the theatre.”

“Oh, you may trust me!” he said confidently. “You may trust me. You’ve no idea of the amount of discretion I have.”

“Perhaps not,” Alison said, and she ventured to look up with a bit of a smile, “for I haven’t seen much of it, have I?”

And behold! at this moment who should come along the street but the Rev. James Cowan, who, as he drew near, stared and better stared at this stranger, even in

summoning up courage to raise his cap to Alison. Ludovick bestowed upon the young probationer but the briefest glance.

"Who's that?" he said to his companion, when the pallid-faced young man in the loose black clothes had passed.

"He is a young friend of ours," Alison made answer, and she appeared a little embarrassed. "A young minister—but he has not got a church yet."

"His trousers would make a dog laugh," Macdonell said indifferently, and as if that were the only comment that was necessary.

And not only did Captain Ludovick walk all the way to the shop with her, but he remained outside until she had finished her purchases, and proceeded to accompany her home again. It did not seem to occur to him that the neighbours might be wondering who was this unknown young man walking with the Minister's daughter.

Indeed he paid but little heed to any one whom they chanced to meet ; and although he did catch another glimpse of the Rev. James Cowan—who was furtively watching them from a distant corner—he made no comment about either him or his trousers this time, but went on talking to Alison. She could not get him to walk quick. He appeared to like this leisurely strolling along the gray pavement, with Alison by his side. And when at length he left her at the Minister's house, and the door was shut, he turned away in a lingering sort of fashion, as if his occupation were gone, and he knew not now what to do.

But she had plenty to do and to think over about his coming back in the afternoon. A hundred times would she rather have had him stay away ; but how could she hint any such thing, after the kindness and hospitality she had received in the Highlands ? No ; all she could do now

was to make everything as tidy as possible about the little parlour; and when Agnes came home she got her help in putting up smart lace curtains—Agnes, meanwhile, being filled with wonderment over the unheralded appearance of this stranger from the far country she had heard so much about. Again and again Alison strove to tell her sister that Ludovick Macdonell was a Roman Catholic, but invariably her heart failed her; she was extremely anxious, she did not ask herself why, that Agnes should think well of him; and there was no time to combat prejudices now.

As it chanced, when the Minister returned home he was accompanied by Mr. Todd, the Precentor; and when they had laid aside their hats and entered the parlour, they resumed the subject that had been occupying them as they walked along. The Precentor was a little, elderly, gray-

whiskered man, who spoke in a soft and suave fashion, as if he was carefully guarding his voice for his musical duties on the Sabbath ; and his manner was of a studied humility, as if he was well aware that pride of office was inconsistent with the character of a Christian. It appeared that a number of the younger members of the congregation had signed and forwarded to him a memorial, begging him to introduce into his repertory a few of the more modern tunes, of a somewhat lighter cast than the old-established *Bangor, York, Ballerma*, and the like ; and the Precentor would not presume to settle this serious question by himself ; he would rather have the Minister's advice.

“ For maself, Mr. Blair,” he was saying (as Alison sat and listened intently for the door-bell), “ I consider it quite naitural that the younger folk should like a pleasant and lightsome tune like *New Lydia* or

Devizes, even if they could hardly expect me to go the length o' *Desert* or *Violet Grove*; for mony o' them practise psalm-tunes at home, and they're better employed that way than in singing idle, or worse than idle, things that come frae theatres and sic places. But then, on the other hand, there's the older folk that have been accustomed a' their lives to *Martyrdom* and *Coleshill* and *Dundee*; they're sair put about by what they ca' fal-de-rals; and there's more than one o' them would say that tunes like *Merksworth* or *Walmer*, where there is pairt-singing, are not respectful to the Psalms, in throwing bits of them this way and that, as they would say."

"Surely," answered the Minister, "the younger people must remember that we enter the Lord's house for the purposes of prayer and worship, and not to exercise any personal gift of voice; and surely those tunes are the best that all are familiar

with, and that exclude none from singing to the praise of God in His own tabernacle."

"Yes, Mr. Blair, that's true enough," the Precentor said, scratching his head in his perplexity, "but I'm afraid they'll no think o' that when they hear that the Precentor o' the U. P. Kirk has been giving out such tunes as *Shrewsbury* and *Cornhill*. I would not like to dictate; I hope I am a person of reasonable judgment and moderation——"

Alison heard no more. The bell rang. She could hear the housemaid go along the lobby; then there were other footsteps; presently the parlour door opened; and there was Ludovick Macdonell, hat in hand. The Minister rose.

"Father," said Alison, rather breathlessly, "this is Captain Macdonell, who is a friend of the Munroes in Fort William—and of Aunt Gilchrist too—and—and——"

“And I thought, as I was passing through Kirk o’ Shields,” said this young man, with the easiest assurance in the world, “I might as well call and see how Miss Blair was, so that I might tell her friends in the north. She made a good many while she was there.”

The Minister received this unexpected guest with a grave courtesy, and bade Alison see that tea was brought in. At first the conversation was of a vague and general kind—about the war rumours, of which the newspapers happened then to be full; and the young Highlander had plenty of information to impart; for he seemed to have travelled all over Europe, and besides, he had a sort of semi-professional interest in the question. The little Precentor remained mute; *Bangor* and *Coleshill* were lost in the discussion of these wide affairs; while Agnes sat, and all unconsciously stared at Alison’s hero,

and not without some little secret elation of heart. For surely he was fit to be a hero, this young person said to herself, so good-looking and gallant as he was; and he talked to her father in a gay and frank fashion that somewhat astonished her; and Alison had never told her that he had so pleasant a smile. And he was going to marry Flora? No wonder Alison had talked a great deal about him—so handsome he looked, so winning and gentle was his manner. She would listen with a far keener interest now (if that was possible) to Alison's stories of her experiences and adventures in the far northern land.

Meanwhile tea had been brought in, and the Precentor had taken advantage of this break to resume his discussion of the merits of the various psalm-tunes, and of the advisability of his listening to the prayer of his humble petitioners. Macdonell listened for a few minutes, and then

he turned to Agnes, who sat next him, and began talking about music generally, and asking her whether there were any concerts in Kirk o' Shields, and so forth.

"I was up at Fort Augustus this autumn," said he in a casual way, "at the performances given by the school-boys at the Benedictine Abbey, just before they left for the holidays; and the way they presented a little comic opera—I forget the name—was really admirable. For an amateur performance, it was as clever a thing as ever I saw done."

Alison quaked to hear these dreadful sounds. The Benedictine Abbey! This was a specimen of his discretion, then? But fortunately the Precentor was engaging the Minister's sole attention at this moment; while as for Agnes, her heart was so well inclined towards this young man that suspicion of his true character never entered her head.

Indeed for Alison this visit was a severely trying ordeal ; and despite all her remembrances of Highland hospitality and kindness, she could not help wishing that the young man was well out of the house. She knew not but that at any moment the disclosure that she dreaded might be made ; and she could imagine her father's look of astonishment, and perhaps some other kind of look directed to herself ; she could foresee her sister's sudden disappointment and reproach ; she knew that the Precentor would have a wonderful story to spread about among the members of the congregation. As for Ludovick Macdonell, he appeared to be quite at his ease. When the Minister, returning to his stranger guest, began to speak of the position of the Free Church in the Highlands, and its representative pastors there, and their doings, Macdonell smilingly observed—

“Yes, sir, I believe the ‘Highland host’ is a formidable contingent when you have any delinquent to punish.”

The Minister raised his heavy eyebrows for a second, for the “Highland host” is generally so described by scoffers and frivolous persons; but he merely went on to say, in his grave and deliberate manner—

“They have done us good service, and that at a time when a tenacious clinging to the truth, and a constant battling for it, is of the first moment. For what do we find all around us—a disposition to slacken the bonds of belief; a tendency to soften and break down those demarcations which our forefathers established, and which are now our only safeguard against an indifferentism that is but the first step on the steep road to infidelity. Oh yes, I hear the talk that is going on! ‘It is time to forget old conflicts,’ they say. High time indeed it

is to forget old conflicts, if we are willing to forget why they were fought, and who fought them, and the stronghold they gave us as a possession for ourselves and our children and our children's children. Yes, I hear what they say!" he continued with a deepening scorn. "Let brotherly love continue—between the wolf and the lamb! All things are ready for it. England is leaning towards synodical church government; Scotland has hankerings for a liturgical worship; and the beginning is surely simple enough—merely a junction between the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians, or rather not a junction but an absorption, for how could we deprive the poor craytures of their ordinance of confirmation and their other rites and ceremonies? Has not the movement begun? Have we not got here and there in our own Presbyterian churches organs and floral services; and why should we not go

on to crucifixes, and high mass, and mummeries of processions ? ”

“ Bless us a’, do they say that ! ” exclaimed Mr. Todd, in a soft, awe-struck voice.

“ But the fusion, as they call it, is not yet,” the Minister resumed. “ There are some of us who still remember that there was such a thing as the Solemn League and Covenant. There are still a few of us who are not to be deluded by Episcopalian Gallios into surrendering one jot or tittle of our protest against the debased and idolatrous practices of the Church of Rome.”

“ Father,” said Alison, in helpless haste, and with her forehead blushing pitifully, “ Aunt Gilchrist said that—that she might perhaps come through to Kirk o’ Shields this winter ; she will be quite surprised to hear that Captain Macdonell has been to see us.”

Feeble as this interposition seemed to be, it proved effectual; for Captain Ludovick, noticing her embarrassment, quickly came to her relief, and began to say some very nice and good-humoured things about Aunt Gilchrist and her ways—to all of which the Minister listened in silence, his face having resumed its ordinary expression of profound and resigned melancholy. And then as the Precentor, after a few final observations about *Comfort*, *French*, and *Artaxerxes*, rose to go, the other guest had no good excuse for remaining, and both proceeded to take their leave. Macdonell said pleasantly enough that he was very glad to have had the chance of making the Minister's acquaintance, and hoped to see them all again, should he revisit Kirk o' Shields. There was an abundant kindness in his look as he bade good-bye to Agnes; and then Alison, following the custom of most small Scotch

households, herself escorted her guests to the outer door, which Ludovick Macdonell opened. Having allowed the Precentor to go on a step or two, he paused for a second as he took her hand, and then he said, regarding her upturned face—

“I want to see you again, Alison, for a minute, before I go back home. You are not terrified now, are you? You see no one has eaten me alive. Well, good-bye for the present—mind, I shall be looking out for you.” And with that he was gone.

So he had not left for good, after all, she asked herself, when she found an opportunity for a little half-frightened self-communion. He was still in this very town, under this dull canopy of a sky; perhaps only a street or two off; perhaps wandering about the bit of a hill on which stands the Established Church; perhaps down at the canal wharves, regarding the grimy work going on there. And he was

still bent upon seeing her again—looking forward to some casual meeting, which might easily be construed into a clandestine meeting, should any one happen to pass by. She assured herself that she would not go forth from the house until she knew that he had finally quitted the town; and yet she could not keep herself from thinking of all the various thoroughfares and districts, and wondering in which of them he might be, and how Kirk o' Shields was looking in his eyes. Had he not even attempted to praise the picturesqueness of these wreathing clouds of steam and smoke? He was well-disposed towards the place, she thought. And she was glad that he seemed to have taken no manner of offence at what her father had said about the Church of Rome.

All the rest of that day she did not go out at all; and half the following night she passed in wondering whether she dared

venture forth the next morning. Next morning came; dark and lowering it was, with the mighty forges flashing their orange flames into the heavy rain-empurpled skies; and she began to think it would be cowardly of her to remain within-doors. Why should she keep him hanging about this dull place on so dismal a morning, if he was bent on seeing her? Finally, having disposed of her household duties, she put on her bonnet and ulster (for the weather was getting cold now), and having fixed in her mind certain errands which might serve as an excuse, if need were, she left the house.

Now, there were two ways of getting down to the centre of Kirk o' Shields—one by the main street of the town, the other by a less frequented thoroughfare that overlooked a branch of the canal and also the wide extent of plain on which the iron-works stood. She chose the latter,

thinking it quite probable he might be strolling about there, watching the barges coming and going far below him, or waiting to see the molten metal of the furnaces run out like crimson serpents into the grooves of the sand-beds. But there was nobody at all in this silent and deserted thoroughfare ; and she was thinking she might just as well return to the main street of the town, when she found herself overtaken. Without turning she knew who this was ; she was not surprised when she heard her name ; she stopped and welcomed him with a kind look and with hardly any embarrassment. Even in that brief glance, however, she could see that his face was much graver than usual.

“ Alison,” he said, “ I have been thinking over all that Flora told me, and I believe I understand your position a little better now, and all the difficulties that surround you. Well, there is but the one

way out of it: come away from among these people altogether!"

She shook her head rather sadly.

"I could not do that."

"Why not?"

"There are duties one can't throw over merely to please one's self," she said. "But even if I were willing to leave my own family and the people among whom I have lived, it isn't my going away merely that would hurt and shock them. I suppose it is a common thing for a young woman to have to leave her own people. But this is different. You don't know what is expected of a Minister's daughter. Ever since you have been here I have been in terror lest any one should find out you were a Catholic: I dared not even tell my own father or sister."

"I guessed as much," said he, rather grimly, "from one or two expressions your father used; and my own inclination was

to tell them there and then and brave it out, only I thought it might worry you, and so I let the thing drop. However, I don't see that it matters much whether they know that I am a Catholic or not. I don't want to convert them; I suppose they would consider it hopeless to try and convert me. But that's neither here nor there. My being a Catholic doesn't concern them: it concerns you and me only——”

“Ludovick,” she said, and she turned her honest, clear eyes towards him with an appeal which he could not withstand, “let this be the end! Perhaps I have said more than I meant to say. But you cannot understand how I am situated. And—and you won't press me any further—don't make it too hard for me to say good-bye——”

Tears sprang to her eyes.

“Of course,” she said, still regarding

him with that look of appeal, "we shall be friends—always, always, always!"

"Alison," said he slowly, "you mean this—that I am to say no more?"

She nodded her head.

"Very well," said he, after a moment's hesitation; "my mouth is shut. But we shall be friends, as you say, always. And you want me to say good-bye, here and now?"

"Yes—yes," she murmured.

"Very well. Good-bye, and God bless you, my darling," he said; and then, before she knew what was happening, he had stooped and kissed her, pressed her hand once more, and she was left in this solitary thoroughfare—regarding that retreating figure through a blinding mist of tears, and with a heart that yearned and yearned to call him back again, in spite of all her strength of will. Then she too turned away; and slowly got back to her father's

house ; and shut herself up in her own room, concealing herself from the light of day, and hiding what she deemed her unmaidenly grief. For it was all over now ; and these bitter and passionate tears and this aching sickness of heart were but a merited punishment meted out to her for having listened to idle promptings and dreamed idle dreams.

Then, in the very midst of this utter prostration of misery she bethought her of the hour at which the next train would pass through Kirk o' Shields for Stirling, Callander, and the north ; and it seemed to her that she might steal along to the station, with some despairing notion, not of speaking to him again, but of being able, herself unseen, to wish him a last farewell. So she hurriedly arose, and removed as well as she could the traces of her tears ; then she quickly walked along the deserted thoroughfare she had left but

half an hour before, and managed to reach the railway-line just as the train was about to start. Stealthily as a ghost, and white-faced, she passed underneath the tunnel, up a wooden staircase, and on to the platform—but so concealing herself that no one in the train could see her. Alas! what was the need of concealment? He was not looking out for her; he had no thought of her being there; these strangers about were all indifferent to her. The great black engine, throwing up clouds of steam that were a bewildering white against the lowering heavens, began to draw away from the station; more and more rapidly it went, dwindling and dwindling the while, until it disappeared altogether; and before her there was nothing but the empty track of black ashes, and the shining lines of rail that went away out narrowing and narrowing until they were lost in the haze that seemed

to fill this dismal and hopeless day. She stood there, absent-eyed and heavy of heart—perhaps with wistful visions before her of the fairer and happier scenes whither he was bound : then the Minister's daughter, still pale-faced and somewhat worn and tired in look, but with a touch of resolution about her lips, walked with firm enough step through the dull streets of Kirk o' Shields, back to her father's house. She was grave and silent, that was all, as she set about her ordinary duties ; not even her sister had any suspicion of what had happened.

CHAPTER V.

INTERVENTION.

A LONG and dreary winter followed ; and the slow weeks and months seemed to plunge Kirk o' Shields into an ever-increasing gloom. Sometimes the land lay hard and silent in the grip of a black frost ; and then there was no breath of wind to stir the atmosphere ; the fumes and vapours hung heavy in the motionless air, so that people forgot what the sky was like. Sometimes a bewilderment of snow was abroad ; and then through the pervading mist the far uplands could be seen to be of a phantom white ; but in the town itself and all round about it the snow was

immediately dusted over with coal, where it was not trodden into mire. And then again would come persistent rain ; but here there was some little compensation ; for if the daytime showed the very extreme of wretchedness and squalor, the night made the flames of the great furnaces more resplendent than ever, as the crimson glow flashed across the wet slates of the house-roofs. Altogether a miserable winter it was, numbing the mental faculties and cramping the bodily powers ; but the members of East Street congregation abated not one jot or tittle of their strict observances ; no matter how hard or wet the weather, every Sabbath morning found them slowly and decorously taking their places in the cold, damp-smelling pews ; while the attendance at the Weekly Prayer-meetings, the Bible Classes, the Young Men's Christian Association, and so forth, was undiminished.

During all this time Alison's anxieties and duties were considerably increased by the fact that her sister Agnes, never very strong, seemed to grow more and more liable to attacks of nervous weakness or excitability; and as these frequently culminated in sleep-walking, Alison had to be on the alert by night as well as by day. It was so strange to be in this little room that seemed filled with the sombre glow of the iron-works, and to watch the timidly uplifted appealing hand, and to hear the murmured "Mother!" which told how far away the spirit was from its frail tenement of a body. Agnes Blair, at all events, had one way of escape from the desolation that overshadowed Kirk o' Shields. Night brought her release, and carried her away to far and shining regions, where she met the gentle-visaged mother who was waiting for her with out-stretched hands. Alison could see her slip noiselessly from the bed,

her large gray eyes entranced and still ; and for a moment she would remain uncertain, as if it took that space of time to waft her across the black night to the mystic splendour of a perpetual dawn—to the great wall of jasper and the radiant gates of the new Jerusalem. Then she would whisper, “Mother!” ; her gentle guide was found ; these two were walking now through the wonderful streets in the city that had “no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it ; for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof ;” and the rapt eyes were gazing on the tree of life, and on the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, that came flowing from the great white throne. And then sometimes (in this little room, in the silence, with Alison half afraid to follow her lest she should rouse her too suddenly) the younger sister would raise her hand slightly, and stand transfixed, as

if she were intently listening. Listening to what?—to the distant singing of the ransomed hosts, or to the voice of the angel proclaiming aloud the doom of Babylon the Great? These were sleepless nights for Alison, though her sister in her unconscious state was amenable enough; and next morning Agnes had no knowledge of these restless wanderings, save as a wistful dream.

Perhaps the elder sister was not altogether sorry to have the whole burden of the domestic duties, and of the charitable labour expected from the Minister's family, devolve upon her own shoulders; for there were many things she wished to forget, and she found that resolute hard work was the best means towards that end. Not that she could entirely banish by-gone occurrences from her mind; for now and again there came a letter from her cousin in Fort William, which was sure to contain

some news of Ludovick Macdonell, even when it did not enclose, as frequently happened, some written communication from himself, addressed to Flora. He was in Egypt now, and on his way to India, where he vaguely hinted that there was some chance of his getting an appointment ; but in the mean time the winter society in Cairo seemed extremely pleasant, and he was in no hurry to leave.

“ But look here, my dear Miss Dimity,” Flora wrote, in enclosing one of these epistles, “ I don’t quite understand why, in the midst of such gaiety, and with all those nice people being kind to him, he should be sighing and pining for his native land. If he wants to come home, what’s to hinder? And there’s such a lot to pine for at this present moment! You should see Fort William now, Miss Dimity—dead—dead as a door-nail ; all the rowing-boats high and dry in the back-yards ; all the yachts

gone ; and the sea-birds find the place so entirely to their mind that you can hear oyster-catchers whistling all along the shore, and see skarts sailing about and bobbing their heads within a stone's-throw of the house. There's no bustle *now* at the quay when the *Mountaineer* comes in ; and what's the use of making yourself very smart and nice, and going down to meet her, when there's never a man on board younger than the captain, or perhaps a commercial traveller bound for Inverness ? We're all asleep here ; the weather is perfectly clear and still ; the hills and the loch are as much in a dream as we are ; and when the fiend John, no matter how far away he is, fires his pistol at some harmless bird on the shore, you would think the whole world was listening. By-the-way, if Ludovick is discontented amid his southern gaities, why doesn't he come home for the winter shooting, which is

very good about Oyre? Hugh was to have come through from Edinburgh; and I should like to see the boy again, notwithstanding that he hates the whole of us poor women creatures. I don't understand why Ludovick should stop in Egypt or in India either, if he would rather be at home.

“But what is far more extraordinary is that he should take such pains to write to me so minutely about himself and his doings. I was never so honoured before, I assure you. Really, this sudden friendship is very flattering; and I begin to think I am not quite so contemptible a being as Hugh would make me out even if I can't throw a stone straight. And, indeed, I don't know that I am not betraying confidence in letting you see these letters; but then, on the other hand, I have sent him such news of you as I could, for let me tell you, my dear Miss Dimity, you are a

pretty poor correspondent. I *did* think you might have told me a little more about the breaking off of that affair between you and Ludovick—for it was precious little I could get out of *him* ; but I suppose in such a very delicate matter it is wise for outsiders to remain outsiders ; and I have no doubt that what you did was for the best. But I can't help being a little sorry sometimes ; for, to speak honestly, he is a *real good fellow*, and I am sure he was very fond of you ; and it would have been very nice for us to have had you as a neighbour at Oyre. However, it's no use talking now."

It was no use talking now ; that was all gone and done with ; indeed, the matrimonial project that at the moment was before Alison's mind, or rather pressed in upon her attention, was of a very different cast. The Rev. James Cowan was now openly and avowedly a suitor for her

hand, though, to be sure, his mother did most of the wooing for him. But that astute little woman had come to see that nothing was to be hoped for from this poor lad of hers accompanying his parents to the Minister's house, and sitting in hopeless apathy until they were ready to come away again. It was in vain that the fond mother praised the logic of James's sermons, and repeated sayings of his, which were mostly of her own invention, and tried to draw him into conversation with the Minister, so long as the listless-eyed, down-spirited, pale-faced probationer had never a word for Alison, and, indeed, covertly and quickly avoided her when there was a chance of meeting her in the streets of Kirk o' Shields. So at last Mrs. Cowan bethought her of a means of spurring him on.

"Ye see, James," said she, with a fine affectation of frankness, "your father and

me have never liked looking forward to your leaving Corbieslaw ; and you are the only son now ; and we had been thinking that even if ye married, while as yet ye hadna a church, ye might bring your wife to the farm, and she might just help to cast an eye o'er things that will be her ain by-and-by. But maybe that's short-sighted. Ye'll be going away from Corbieslaw, James, sooner or later, when ye get a call ; and I've been considering that it might be better for ye in many ways to make the change now. If ye were to marry Alison Blair, and go to Edinburgh, and take a bit house there for yourselves, ye would be mair among folk, and have a better chance of getting a congregation ; and I'm sure that Mrs. Gilchrist, wi' a' that distillery money, would see that her niece was well provided for. We'll do our pairt ; and though I'm sweirt to break into the store o' napery at Corbieslaw, still there's enough

and to spare for the quiet way ye would be beginning; and surely it would be ill done o' Mrs. Gilchrist, after a' the fuss she has made about Alison Blair, if she did not do something real handsome. That would be a chance for ye, James; ye ought to see folk; better for ye to be in Edinburgh, ready to step into any vacant pulpit that offers, than writing sermons at Corbieslaw."

She had hit the nail on the head this time. The possibility of having a house of his own—of escaping from the brutal tyranny and contempt of his ghoul-faced father—awoke a world of new ideas and half-piteous hopes in the breast of the luckless probationer; and as it seemed that Alison Blair was to be the means of his deliverance, he turned to her with a sort of mute and wistful appeal. He did not speak. But he patiently walked home from church every Sabbath day with Alison and her sister; and the congregation soon

began to make comments—the elders being of opinion that if this lad married the Minister's daughter, Alexander Cowan of Corbieslaw would be more domineering in the church than ever, their wives hinting that Mrs. Cowan was a shrewd and a sharp woman, who had an eye on the money that every one knew was coming to Alison.

Indeed, in time it came to be regarded as a settled affair; and Mrs. Cowan was not the one to contradict any such pleasant rumour. In fact, she herself went to the Minister to demand his approval. Now, in Kirk o' Shields, as has already been said, not only was all outward expression of the natural affections severely checked, but it was considered almost unseemly to mention them. The word "love" was never used at all, except in a pious sense. When Mrs. Cowan went to the Minister to tell her story, and to gain his consent,

he was exceedingly embarrassed and even resentful at being approached on such a subject. He had no thought of inquiring how the young people were disposed towards each other; still less would it have entered his mind to go to his daughter and ask for any confidence. He dismissed Mrs. Cowan as quickly as he could; and she went away well content; for she could easily twist about the one or two half-impatient phrases he had used so as to convince Alison that her father was looking forward to seeing her become James Cowan's wife.

And as for Alison herself? Well, if the young probationer had come forthwith and abruptly asked her to marry him, she would probably, with a touch of her father's impatience, have told him not to make a fool of himself, and so made an end of that matter. But there was something pathetic in the spectacle of this poor lad, frightened-

eyed and cowed of manner, mutely sitting in the corner of the room, or humbly endeavouring, perhaps, to say a word or two to the Minister when some professional subject was brought forward. He sent Alison one of his manuscript sermons, which was a harmless kind of gift. Out of mere curiosity she read it. It really was a most business-like production ; carefully divided and arranged ; and if there was not much of the burning fire of rhetoric in it, at least it was clear and sensible and simple in style. The text was I. Corinthians, ii. 14 : “ But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God : for they are foolishness unto him : neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned ; ” and the main argument was that the mystery of godliness was beyond the reach of reason, and that human knowledge, while efficient within its own sphere, was wholly inefficient, and not to be re-

garded, when it attempted to deal with the higher things of faith. She thought it was exceedingly well constructed ; and, being of a kindly disposition, she said so to the young man, whose pallid face flushed up between embarrassment and pleasure, for he was not accustomed to appreciation. But when Mrs. Cowan heard of this approval, and proudly came to Alison, and asked her what she thought of James's future now—plainly intimating that Alison herself was concerned—the girl grew somewhat grave and reserved. It is true that it had been conveyed to her that her father would be well pleased if she married the young minister ; and she could understand that the congregation generally would approve of such a step ; but at all events, the time was not yet ; and her brows gathered together a little when she found the farmer's wife taking the whole thing for granted.

But the most startling event that occurred this winter—or rather the early spring it was now—was a sudden and unexpected visit from Aunt Gilchrist, who descended like a blast from the mountains into this dull level of dreariness. The tempestuous small dame had quarrelled with one of her fellow-patients at the Crieff Hydropathic Establishment; had instantly resolved to leave and bestow her patronage on the rival resort in the island of Bute; and as she had to pass through Kirk o' Shields on the way, she wrote that she would arrive there on the following afternoon, and would stay the night. Alison read this letter with a quick joy at her heart. Here was some one associated with that happy and beautiful time she had spent in the Highlands; here was some one to whom she could talk about those kind friends in the north. And on the morning on which she got this note, Kirk o' Shields

was looking almost cheerful. A cold north-west wind had been blowing overnight, and some of the smoke was cleared away ; so that there was a faint semblance of sunlight on the gray pavements ; and the spire of the Established Church, on the top of the little hill, rose into clouds that here and there grew thin and showed a wan suggestion of blue. But by the time it was necessary for Alison to go along to the station, the afternoon of the short day was closing over ; and the smoke-clouds seemed to gather together again ; so that Kirk o' Shields presented its usual appearance—with its crimson fires and white blasts of steam leaping and twisting and writhing into the desolation of the now darkening heavens.

“And here's my bit lady !” Aunt Gilchrist called aloud, the moment she stepped on to the platform ; and the bright-eyed, fresh-complexioned, silver-haired little

dame caught Alison by the shoulders, and kissed her again and again. "Well, well, it's just a delight to see you ; for I've been a lone, lone woman, Alison, my dear, since I went to the Hydropathic ; and many's the time I've wished ye were with me, just to stand up for me, and teach them no to trample on a poor old creature like me. And I've booked all my luggage through to Glasgow, Alison ; so that I've nothing but this bit bag here ; and we'll get into a cab at once——"

"A cab, Aunt Gilchrist !" said Alison, in dismay. "Do you really want a cab ? For there isn't such a thing in Kirk o' Shields."

"Bless my soul and body, what kind of a town is this !" the old dame exclaimed ; but she was in far too good a humour over seeing her niece to be seriously put about. "And where's the gas ? Do they no see it's dark ? Or is this the only kind o'

daylight they've got in this dreadful place——”

“If you would rather not walk, aunt,” Alison said doubtfully, “I could send for a machine——”

“Away wi' your machines!” Aunt Gilchrist cried. “We'll just set out on foot—it'll serve to keep Periphery in proper subjection. And ye'll carry my bag for me, Alison, and let me lean on your arm; for you're a strong young lass, for all your delicate complexion; and many's the time I wished ye were at Crieff to fight my battles for me. Ye would have taught them something, I'm thinking!—for ye've a sharp tongue in your head when ye like—oh ay——”

“I should not have thought you wanted any help in that way, aunt,” her niece said demurely, as they left the station.

“Now, Alison Blair, don't be impertinent to an old woman like me,” Aunt Gilchrist

made answer, with great severity, "the very moment I set eyes on ye! Who else would have come to see ye in such a fearsome hole as this—mercy on me, it's like the bottomless pit! Surely it's worse since I was here last—how many years was that? It's enough to frighten a body—ye'd think ye'd got into the bad place by some kind o' accident, and without a chance o' getting out again. Does any human creature ever come here that can avoid it?"

"Oh, we don't mind it, Aunt Gilchrist; we're used to it," Alison said cheerfully. "And this morning the town was looking quite pleasant; we could actually see the sun shining—or something like it. But I think it was getting your letter, aunt, that made the morning seem so bright and nice."

"Ay, ye're there again, are ye, with your palavering tongue!" the old dame

protested ; but all the same, she clung a little closer to the warm young arm that gave her such help as she wanted ; and in this wise, and without any great quarrelling, they by-and-by reached the Minister's house.

"How are ye, Minister, how are ye ?" said Aunt Gilchrist gaily, as she entered the parlour with outstretched hand.

"I am fairly well in health," the Minister made answer, in his slow and serious fashion. "But the years are passing over us, Jane ; it is time we should be preparing ourselves for the long journey."

"I'm no come to that yet," said Aunt Gilchrist briskly. "I'm going to Rothesay. Rothesay's a grand place in cold weather like this ; the sea-air is as soft as soft ; and there are no crowds o' tourist-bodies swarming about in the spring. Alison, my dear, I would like a cup of tea."

"Yes, indeed, aunt, you shall have that

at once," her niece said promptly; "and then in a little while you must have something more substantial; for one of the elders is coming in this evening, with his wife and son—I would rather have had you all to ourselves, but this is a long-standing engagement—and we shall all have a proper tea together."

"An elder?" said Aunt Gilchrist, with a bit of a sniff. "I hope the body is not going to preach at me."

Indeed, her attitude towards the whole Cowan family, when they arrived, was soon seen to be distinctly hostile; but her special antagonism seemed to be aroused by the thick-lipped, wide-nostrilled, heavy-headed farmer, whose ponderous assumption of importance seemed to irritate this alert little person beyond all endurance. As for Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw, no sooner did she discover who this unknown visitor was than instantly she set to work

to propitiate Aunt Gilchrist by every description of servile fawning and flattery. The small, shrewd eyes expressed an eager approval of everything that Mrs. Gilchrist said ; it was Mrs. Gilchrist alone who was listened to—and listened to with humbly appreciative smiles and nods. Poor James was nowhere. The presence of this stranger annihilated him. But sometimes he looked at Alison—perhaps wistfully thinking of his chances of escape to Edinburgh.

Now, when this evening meal was over, Aunt Gilchrist was naturally looking forward to a pleasant little chat about friends and acquaintances, or about affairs of the day—notably a murder-trial that was then exciting much interest ; but this frivolous waste of time in nowise commended itself to Mr. Cowan of Corbieslaw. By sheer weight of words he bore down all opposition until there was nothing heard but an

interminable monologue on church government, to which the Minister listened with a kind of abstracted air, only putting in a correcting word now and again. Aunt Gilchrist began to fret and fume. Once or twice she turned to Alison with a look of amazement, apparently asking if this was the kind of evening she usually passed. And still the elder laboured on with his somnolent and confused incoherences about synods and presbyteries, until the brisk little dame abruptly addressed her niece.

“I’m thinking this is pretty dry work,” said she contemptuously. “It makes me wish the Doctor was here—and the decanter.”

Alison smiled.

“I’ve provided that for you, aunt,” said she, and forthwith—to the wonderment and consternation of the Corbieslaw family—she deliberately went to the sideboard and brought out an old-fashioned decanter

of cut crystal, which was filled with some dark ruby fluid. Then she produced a wine-glass, and a tumbler, and some sugar, and some cinnamon, while Agnes was sent to fetch boiling water.

“There, now,” said Aunt Gilchrist, with her bright-coloured face beaming with satisfaction (and the elder had been startled into a momentary silence), “that’s like my bit lady—everything straight, and honest and aboveboard; no tricks, and hiding, and make-believe. I don’t like the hole-and-corner bedroom business at the Hydropathics; but then, to be sure, it’s hard to go to bed on a cold winter’s night without a drop o’ something to comfort ye——”

“It’s quite true, Mrs. Gilchrist,” said Mrs. Cowan, in her suavest manner, “yes, it’s quite true.”

“It would be better,” said the farmer, scowling at his wife, “if ye would remem-

ber that that drop o' something is just the curse of this country."

"Ay, do ye say that now?" remarked Aunt Gilchrist, as she coolly began to prepare her negus, Alison helping her the while. "Well, I'm no the country, and it never cursed me."

"I'm sure of that, Mrs. Gilchrist," said the farmer's wife, in her politest Edinburgh accent. "Everybody can see that. I'm sure ye take nothing but what is good for ye."

The scowl on the farmer's face grew darker as he heard his wife thus shamelessly go over to the enemy; but he held his peace; perhaps in his dull brain there was some glimmering guess at the reason for her extraordinary complacency. Meanwhile the determined little wine-bibber at the table had begun to sip her negus with much satisfaction—never dreaming of the notable discovery she was shortly to make.

“Well, Minister,” said she, “I’m thinking I would just like to take Alison away with me to Rothesay for a week or two. I’m sure the poor thing wants a breath of fresh air after being so long in this dreadful town. A town?—it’s not like a town at all; it’s like a pandemonium. I should think ye would have little difficulty in describing to your congregation the terrors of the place of punishment—ye’ve but to bid them look around them. And I would like to take her away for a week or two, just to cheer her up; for they’re no so bad, they Hydropathics, after a’; they have their bits o’ diversions—a dance now and again, and the like——”

“Dancing!” exclaimed the big elder in solemn tones. “I should not like to hear o’ a minister’s daughter taking to dancing. We ken what comes o’ dancing. We ken what happened in the time of Herod the tetrarch——”

“Herod the tea-tray!” said the impatient little dame with open scorn. “Do ye imagine that a young Scotch lass cannot dance a Highland Schottische without wanting somebody’s head served up in a charger?”

“Jane,” said the Minister severely, “I think your mention of scriptural things might be a little more respectful and becoming.”

“Well, indeed, Mrs. Gilchrist,” the farmer’s wife interposed, to make all things smooth and pleasant, “there may not be so much harm in dancing as people say. No, not *quite* so much as they say. I hardly approve of it myself any more than Alexander does; but maybe there’s not *quite* so much harm in it. Besides, the younger people have newer ideas, so to speak, and I’m not sure that James would set his face altogether against dancing—dancing in moderation, that is—in reasonable sobriety and moderation.”

Aunt Gilchrist directed a swift glance towards James; but the abashed probationer instantly lowered his eyes.

"I would like to take Agnes too," she resumed, turning again to the Minister, "but I'm afraid ye cannot spare them both; if ye can, I'll just be too glad."

"It's a kind offer, Jane," the Minister made answer, "and I'm sure the girls are obliged to you; but Agnes is hardly well enough to go anywhere at present, and as for Alison, I doubt if she could leave her various duties, outside the house as well as in, with a clear conscience. She was a long time with you last summer."

"If I may speak," observed Mrs. Cowan, with an engaging humility, "if I may speak, I would say this, Mrs. Gilchrist, that it would be a useful experience for us all, but especially for Miss Agnes, if ye were to take Miss Blair away wi' ye for the time ye propose; for then we should

a' have to learn how to do without her. And perhaps ye may have heard," the farmer's wife continued, with a significant little simper, "that we are expecting some such change?"

"What's that?" said Aunt Gilchrist sharply; and she glanced with a sudden surprise from Mrs. Cowan to Alison, and back again, and even at the white-faced young probationer, who had furtively looked up.

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Cowan, not to over-emphasize the hint—for she could see that Alison was grievously confused—"a young lady naturally looks forward to changing her name sooner or later, and it's just as well that her friends and her family should have learned to bear the loss—for I'm sure you'll agree with me, Mrs. Gilchrist, that it will be a great loss to them in the case of Miss Blair."

This plausible explanation in nowise

quieted Aunt Gilchrist's suspicions ; and the first thing she did as soon as the Cowans were gone was to go to her own room and summon Alison thither.

"Alison," said she, "what did that simpering idiot o' a woman mean ? Is there a talk of your getting married ?"

"I believe there is, aunt," the girl answered.

"To whom, then ?" demanded Aunt Gilchrist, with an ominous frown.

"Well," said Alison, after a moment's hesitation, "to—to the young man who was here to-night—young Mr. Cowan."

"What !" exclaimed the little dame, taking a step backward in order the better to stare at her niece. "What ! To that creature ! To that wizened wisp of a thing ! To that voiceless, washed-out rag of a stickit minister ? Alison Blair, have ye taken leave of your senses ?"

"Well, they all seem to expect it—that's

all I know about it," Alison said petulantly ; for it was hard for her to be reproached for what was none of her doing or wishing.

" But you yourself—what do you say ?" was the next sharp question.

" I haven't been asked," she answered, with her petulance darkening to sullenness.

" Now, Alison, don't make me angry !" her aunt exclaimed. " Don't you quarrel with me. Are you going to marry that insignificant creature out of spite—is that it ? Oh, mind you, I've seen that done often enough. I've seen girls marrying out of spite, and precious sick and sorry they were afterwards. Your family and your friends won't let you marry the man you want, and so you revenge yourself on them by marrying a man you hate or care nothing about. Is that what ye're after ? "

" No, it is not !" said Alison, with proud lips, but with tears near coming to her

eyes. "It is not, and you've no right to say any such thing."

"Oh, very well, very well!" said Aunt Gilchrist, still regarding her niece doubtfully. "But what about that young Macdonell? Answer me that now, Alison, for I've heard something from Flora."

"Captain Macdonell and I are the best friends in the world, and we mean to remain so, and I don't care who knows it," the girl answered, with the same proud expression of face, though her head was partly turned away.

Aunt Gilchrist looked at her for several seconds in silence.

"Ye're a queer creature, Alison; and I'm not sure that I've quite made ye out yet. But I'm not going to quarrel with ye, for all your stiff-neckedness and pride and wilfulness. I'll talk to ye in the morning. I'm not going to let you make a fool o' yourself, if I can help it. Oh, I

know what you wilful young hussies are capable o' doing when people thwart you ; and here you've been nursing schemes and plans, and not a word to me, not a word, though I thought I had some right to be consulted. Oh yes, yes, yes," she continued, as if some new light were breaking in upon her. "I see now why that cringing, crimping, smirking creature o' a woman was a' bows and becks and smiles. My certes, here's a pretty clanjamfrey of a project to be building up in the dark ! Oh yes, to be sure, Mrs. Gilchrist was always in the right ; and there mightn't be *quite* so much harm in dancing ; and Miss Blair *ought* to go away to the Hydropathic, that we might try how we could bear her loss ; while that great big yellow-faced, sow-snouted lump of a man sat and stared at my bit drop o' negus as if he thought Satan was likely to make a sudden appearance on the table. But never you mind,

Alison, my dear. They havena carried off my bit lady yet ! No, they have not ; and maybe they'll just find out that they've to settle wi' me first. So just give me a kiss, my dear, and say good night."

Alison's face had considerably lightened at these kinder tones, and she would have bid her aunt good night as she desired ; but as the Minister's daughter she was bound to remember the rules of the house.

"Are you not going down again, aunt ?" she asked. "Father will expect you at family worship, and I hear the servants just going in."

"You pretty Miss Innocence !" this audacious little woman exclaimed, with a wicked laugh—and she pushed the girl to the open door, and kissed her affectionately by way of saying good night. "Don't you see that that's the very reason why I'm going to bed ?"

CHAPTER VI.

A SUMMONS.

AUNT GILCHRIST came and went ; the young spring days began to lengthen—even in this sombre Kirk o' Shields ; and Alison, with a calm serenity of mind that she mistook for forgetfulness, busied herself from hour to hour with her various tasks, and strove to earn, or to continue, the good-will of all these diverse folk—many of them intractable enough, some meanly suspicious of her advances, others “dour” to a degree—who made up her father's congregation. But especially was she kind and considerate towards James Cowan ; for the poor pale-faced probationer, whatever his pathetic fancies may have

been, did not bother her much ; while his mother, despite her insinuating smiles and hints addressed to Alison, failed to drive the disheartened lad into any more resolute attitude. Alison was grateful to him for his silence ; and she read the two or three sermons he timidly submitted to her ; and comforted him with the assurance that they would be very useful to him when he received the long-looked-for call.

But this tranquil life was about to be disturbed. Summer-time found Aunt Gilchrist again at Fort William ; and nothing would do the imperious small dame but that Alison should repair thither at once. Periphery, she wrote, had been almost entirely subjugated and driven forth—though sometimes it returned and feebly tried to regain possession ; she was going to make up for all the crippled time ; Alison was to come and share in her wild diversions ; and no longer need the bit

lady fear being buffeted about by any fitful gusts of temper. Agnes, she was glad to hear, appeared to be quite strong again ; very well, let her take a turn at managing the Minister's house ; the elder sister deserved a holiday ; besides, Aunt Gilchrist demanded that she should come, and there was to be no argument, but immediate obedience.

When Alison received this summons her heart fell to beating with a marvellous rapidity ; and she was somewhat breathless and bewildered ; and also not a little resentful against herself that so simple a proposal should so entirely upset her peace of mind. For she had come to consider all that had happened in the previous summer as a sort of dream, to be regarded with a touch of tenderness, perhaps, until it should finally fade away and be forgotten. But this possibility of reawakening associations, of seeing actual places that had become

almost visionary to her, and of meeting, not the vague phantoms that dwelt in her solitary reveries, but the living people themselves, was altogether a startling thing. Instinctively she shrank back from it. And then again she began to argue with herself. What had she to dread? The days of cruel anxiety, of bitter farewells, of hidden heartache, were all over now. She had schooled herself into acquiescence. And why should she be afraid to meet Ludovick Macdonell? He and she had promised to be fast friends: and what was the friendship worth if she was not prepared to abide by it? Probably by this time he had half forgotten her. In his numerous letters from Egypt and from India he had hardly ever mentioned her. If she went to Fort William she would merely find that she had one acquaintance the more—that is, if he happened to be in Lochaber at all.

Indeed, when the Minister's consent had been obtained and her brief preparations made, and when she was ready to set forth upon her northward journey, she had almost convinced herself that she could meet Captain Ludovick without any too serious qualm, and that in returning to Lochaber she was not risking the reawakening of any too poignant regrets. It is true that as she entered the little station a sudden throb went through her heart ; for she could not but remember the terrible day on which she had come up hither—a pale, trembling ghost of a creature—to see the black train thunder away into the mist. The mere sight of those long, empty lines of rail seemed to make her shiver. But that was a long time ago now ; and here was Agnes, very officious with her last little kindnesses ; and joyful anticipation, not the recalling of by-gone anguish, was the natural mood for a

traveller about to enter upon a long and pleasant holiday.

Moreover, this was a singularly clear and cheerful morning that was greeting her setting out, when once she had got entirely away from the dark and poisoned region surrounding Kirk o' Shields. She saw the sky again—a wonderful thing, far-reaching, with soft white clouds in it that hardly stirred. The air was sweet that came in at the carriage-window. And the farther and farther northward that she got, the more and more beautiful became her surroundings. The sun lay warm on the wide meadows through which the Forth winds its silver way; the gray battlements of Stirling Castle rose far into the blue. The rugged chasm of the Pass of Leny was hanging in rich summer foliage; a thousand million diamonds flashed on the rippling waters of Loch Lubnaig. And then she got away up into wilder regions—into

the solitudes of Glen Ogle and Glen Dochart: but the mountains had nothing forbidding about them on this beautiful morning — there was a velvet softness in the shadows even where a towering peak grew dark under a passing cloud, while for the most part the lower slopes and shoulders were dappled yellow with sunlight. And then again, as she was nearing Tyndrum, she grew still more curiously interested in these outward things; and her heart, in a sort of laughing mood, began to amuse itself with a wild impossibility. For it was at Tyndrum station that Captain Ludovick had made his appearance — having come down through the Black Mount forest to intercept her on her southward journey; and might he not be here to meet her now? She assured herself that she would welcome him gladly, even joyously; there would be no embarrassment at all; she would call

him "Ludovick," and take his hand, and know that he had not forgotten her. She could not understand how the thought of meeting him had alarmed her. Here she had no fear. In a few minutes she would look out of the carriage-window; she would call to him "Ludovick!—Ludovick!" she could see the flash of recognition in his eyes, his quick step forward, and his opening the carriage-door. Sister-like, she would be as kind to him as she could; and they would go through the remaining stages of the journey in great comfort and happiness; and he would tell her all about Hugh and Flora and the rest of them—while Loch Awe and gray Kilchurn went by, and the Pass of Brander, and the hills of Benderloch, until a sweep of Loch Etive brought them in sight of Morven and Mull, and the mountains that face the blue western seas.

But even as the train slowed into the

little station she knew that all this was entirely impossible ; and it was merely to indulge a whimsical fancy that she affected to look out for some one ; and when the train had moved on again, and she had resumed her solitary seat, she could hardly say she was disappointed. For well she was aware why it was that Ludovick Macdonell had been so sparing of his references to herself in these letters from abroad ; and why he had scrupulously refrained from trying to reopen any communication with her. It was his quick sense of courtesy and of consideration towards her that restrained him. He would not weary her with his importunity. Everything should be as she wished. And when she told him that she was tied hand and foot by reasons and circumstances that she could not explain and that he could not understand, he was bound to believe her, and to take her no as meaning no. And well she

knew that in accepting Aunt Gilchrist's invitation to go to the Highlands, she was not in danger of encountering any distressing persecution on his part.

At the same time, when she got to the end of her railway-journey, and found Hugh and Flora awaiting her, she was a little surprised, not perhaps to find that Captain Ludovick was not with them, but that they did not refer to his absence. They said nothing about him, in fact, even when they were comfortably settled on board the *Mountaineer*, and had plenty of time for rapid questions and answers. And then again, as the steamer moved away from Oban harbour, Alison was keenly interested in all the objects around her; for these seemed so strangely different from the memories of them with which she had beguiled the dark hours of the winter. Everything was so extraordinarily vivid. The air seemed full of light. To

Hugh and Flora doubtless these were familiar features—the pretty little bay, all of a trembling blue, save where the sunlight blazed and shimmered on the ripples—Kerrara, with its slopes of green and points of weeded rock—the long spur of Lismore ending in the small gray lighthouse—the far mountains of Mull and Morven, clear to the top, the clefts and scars on their vast brown shoulders traced in lines of the purest, most delicate azure—all this was familiar enough to them ; but it was not at all familiar to her. The world seemed so beautiful !—so surpassingly brilliant—and yet so peaceful and calm and still. It appeared to her that in leaving Kirk o' Shields she had come out of a long and sombre night, and got into the white day again ; and that her eyes were naturally bewildered by the overpowering radiance around her. The phantom pictures of her winter dreams had fled : this was the living

world, filled with sunlight, the wide skies all open, the wide seas all trembling in that lustrous blue, a gladness everywhere ! They could not get her to go below for lunch. She would not go. So Hugh had to take Flora down, and see that she was provided for ; but instantly he was up again, and sitting beside this pretty, pale-complexioned, gray-eyed cousin from the south. He lit a cigarette (a newly acquired habit for him) and did not talk much to her ; for he could see that she was occupied—and more than content.

Flora came on deck again, and the general conversation was resumed—about Aunt Gilchrist's newly developed passion for the game of poker, about the last exploits of the boy John, about the big takes of bream they had been getting on recent evenings, and so forth ; but never a word was said about Ludovick Macdonell. Yet here was Appin ; and vividly enough,

as the boat slowed into the pier, could Alison recall the broad-shouldered, slim-built young fellow, with the laughing eyes, and clear, sunburnt complexion, whom she had seen come down with his long swinging pace to the steamer. There was no Captain Ludovick at Appin pier now; perhaps he was not even in Lochaber; perhaps he had got that appointment, and had remained in India. And so the *Mountaineer* went on again, through the fair and shining day. Up here Loch Linnhe lay in a dead calm—long swathes of white and blue without a ripple anywhere; there was no stirring of wind; even the rugged and lonely hills of Kingairloch, that usually are dark and purple-stained, showed their slopes of red granite and gray schist through a faint haze of summer heat, and were grown quite ethereal in hue. As the steamer cleft its way through the still water a school of porpoises took it into

their heads to race her ; and ever and anon a dorsal fin would appear on the calm surface, gleaming for an instant in the sunlight as the oily-looking fish rolled over. The very quietude of the scene around them seemed to moderate the garrulity of the cousins ; Hugh lit another cigarette and began to walk up and down the deck ; Flora leaned her two hands on the gunwale, and her chin on her hands, to look abroad over that shining breadth of sea ; while Alison watched the slow passing by of the successive bays, the rocky shores, the upward-sloping plantations, the barer summits of the hills receding into the almost cloudless sky. There was but little talking ; anyhow Ludovick Macdonell's name was not even mentioned.

And then at last they came in sight of the southern outskirts of Fort William—little white dots of houses among the trees, with pleasant green slopes rising behind

them, and the vast bulk of Ben Nevis, seamed and scarred, towering far behind. Those pretty little villas set among gardens had a smiling and cheerful appearance as they were brought closer and closer ; and Alison jumped to her feet to respond, when she perceived that from certain windows a welcome was being waved to her. She knew the house well, and her heart warmed towards it. How often had she not sat and dreamed of it—in the drear winter nights of Kirk o' Shields, in the hushed parlour, with every soul in the house bent over a pious book—dreamed of it and of all the kindness and new wonderful experiences connected with it. As she waved her handkerchief to those unseen friends, her eyes were moist. Indeed they had been kind to her, in their robust, happy-go-lucky fashion.

And here, awaiting their arrival, was the lad John. But John was in an exceed-

ingly bad temper. There had come down to the quay a band of itinerant musicians, who were going away by the steamer ; and they had been utilizing their time of waiting by playing a series of loud and lively strains, which, instead of having any mollifying effect upon John, only irritated him, for he was bent on business. And not only that, but even as he was conveying Alison's things ashore, she following him, one of these musicians had the effrontery to come up cap in hand to the newly landed party, whereupon John interposed angrily.

"Oh, go aweh hom!" he said, with crushing scorn. "Go aweh hom! Your noise gives me a sore head. I would sooner hear a bull roaring than you and your noise!" And with that he seized the shafts of his barrow and manfully set forth—to display to the world the difference between a person who could do

honest work and an idle, useless, strolling vagabond.

Aunt Gilchrist was seated in the front garden—amid a brave show of roses red and white, of pansies pale yellow and deep purple, of sweet-william of every shade, of nasturtiums, and pheasant's eyes, and double-poppies; and she herself was just as bright and pleasant to look at as any of them. Her welcome of her bit lady was of the warmest.

“Yes, my dear,” said she, and she took the girl's hand in hers, and patted it affectionately, “this is something like the kind of place for you and me to be together. I tell you I'll never go to yon town again. I never will, Alison. You'll have to come to see me. Do ye remember that dreadful night—wi' yon great, big, jaundiced-faced baboon o' an elder maundering away about synods, and assemblies, and sederunts?—mercy o' me!”

“ But no doubt it was interesting to him, aunt,” said Alison, with a smile.

“ Interesting ! I’ll not believe it. I’ll not believe a word of it. It was done just for the pleasure of hearing his own continuous gabble and gabble, like a burst rain-pipe on a pouring day. What I should have done but for that comforting drop o’ port-wine negus—— ”

“ How is your neuralgia, aunt ? ” Alison asked.

The little old dame held up a warning finger.

“ Whish ! Alison,” she said, in a whisper. “ Periphery’s lying quiet just now ; we’ll no waken him. I’ve a kind o’ feeling in the left side o’ my foot that I don’t entirely like. I’m afraid Periphery’s no quite driven out o’ the house yet ; he’s lying asleep in the cellar, as ye may call it ; but as long as he doesna get up and begin to stamp about, we’ll just say nothing.”

"And are you still taking your port-wine negus?" Alison asked.

"What's that got to do with it?" the old lady retorted, with some sharpness. "Are you setting up to be a doctor too? Are you going to begin to blether about bromides and iodides? I tell ye, ye may fill yourself wi' drugs from week's end to week's end, and ye may dance about from one Hydropathic to another from January to December; and Periphery 'll just laugh at you, and have as firm a grip o' ye as ever; but if ye can coax the bit chappie to lie quiet, by paying no heed to him at all, and doing nothing to stir him up, then ye've got a chance of getting something like peace and comfort."

"But I suppose you can walk well enough, aunt?" Alison proceeded to ask.

"H'm!" said Aunt Gilchrist doubtfully. "I can walk. Oh, yes, I can walk. But I cannot say that I am very eager about

walking. It's a fine thing to let sleeping dogs lie."

And then again Aunt Gilchrist said—

"Well, I suppose ye've kept your word, my dear. I never got that line ye promised to send me if they began to drive ye into marrying that poor, shambling, shauchly windlestrae o' a creature; so I supposed that smirking mother o' his was letting ye alone——"

"But what's that, aunt?" Flora cried interposing. "Is Alison going to be married—and to somebody we don't know? Why didn't you say anything about it?" Then she turned to Alison with a curious look in her face. "Is it true, Alison? Are you going to be married?"

"Perhaps I'd better wait until I'm asked," Alison answered, with reasonable modesty.

"Come away now," Aunt Gilchrist said, taking the girl's arm. "Come away into

the house. That's a secret between you and me, Alison. When the time comes, I'll tell them all about the stickit Minister. Oh, ay, *when the time comes!*" She laughed quite gaily. "'Deed, that was a fine plot for me to discover; and if I hadna discovered it, I don't know what might not have happened; for you're just that wilful and perverse, you stiff-necked little Puritan! And you were very near quarrelling wi' me, too. Quarrelling wi' me!—I like your impudence!"

"Well, it isn't easy quarrelling with you, aunt," Alison said, "unless when Periphery has wakened up."

"Whish, I tell you, whish!" the old lady said, in a peremptory whisper; and then they all went into the house, where the Doctor's wife was waiting for them at the tea-table.

Now, Aunt Gilchrist was a considerate person; she knew that young people like

to be by themselves at times ; so presently she had ordered off the three cousins to find amusement for the afternoon, until the evening should summon them to supper and her favourite game of cards. At first there was a talk of getting sea-lines and going after the bream ; but Flora interposed.

“Of course,” said she, laughing, “Alison will go if you ask her. But she’ll just hate it all the time. She’s always so neat and trim ; and she can’t bear getting her fingers and her cuffs wet——”

“What is far more horrid,” Alison herself said, “is the flopping of the fish in the bottom of the boat—near your dress : they seem to come alive again when you least expect it——”

“Very well, let’s get out the gig, Flora,” was the brother’s suggestion, which was instantly adopted. “We’ll take Alison for a row ; and she can steer. The oars are in the gig, so we can get off at once.”

And thus it was that Alison speedily found herself in command of the long and shapely boat, with her two cousins leisurely pulling a slow and measured stroke, out into the glassy plain. The warm afternoon sunshine was now streaming along the loch, lighting up the bracken-covered knolls, the grassy slopes of the hills, and the green and yellow patches of the crofts along the shore ; while the sea was so still that the shining spars of the yachts sent down reflections unbroken by any line or ripple. There was no particular designation before these voyagers. They went this way and that, exploring the various shores ; the rowers rowing with idle but regular stroke ; Alison seeming to drink in the joy and calm and beautiful colour all around her. Evening found them up at the mouth of upper Loch Eil ; and now, while the western hills were darkening in shades of softest olive-green,

the sea around them was a plain of burnished gold and pale rose-purple. A small boat crossing that golden plain was itself of jet-black, and as it went on its way it left behind it two long divergent lines of lilac, like the attenuated wings of an insect. When the cousins rested from their rowing, the silence around them was so intense that they could hear the sound of voices coming across from the Corpach shore. This was not like Kirk o' Shields.

On their way home to Fort William, Alison took Flora's oar, and Flora went to the tiller; and sometimes these two were chatting to each other; and sometimes they could hear Hugh humming the old Gaelic air that is known as "The Cowboy;" or perhaps Flora, in a pause of silence, would sing to herself, but with no great sadness, a verse of "The Lowlands o' Holland"—

*" The love that I had chosen,
Was to my heart's content ;
The saut sea will be frozen
Before that I repent ;
Repent it will I never
Until the day I dee,
Though the Lowlands o' Holland
Hae twined * my love and me."*

By the time they had leisurely got back to Fort William the evening was well on ; but the darkness it had brought with it was confined to the massive bulk of the hills along the opposite shore ; overhead there was a clear and luminous sky, with a few purple and orange-fringed clouds ; while the loch around them had become of a trembling silver-gray, for a slight wind had arisen, and the glassy surface was gone.

And it was still in a beautiful lambent twilight that they had supper, and thereafter took to cards—in a room fronting the west. This was a very unscientific game of poker that Alison was now called upon

* *Twined*—severed.

to witness. Aunt Gilchrist's chief aim seemed to be to engage in a battle-royal with her brother the Doctor; and when these two combatants closed, the others having given up, the fun waxed fast and furious. For the Doctor knew but little of the game; and in his perplexity he invariably consulted his wife, who knew less, but was ever good-humouredly ready with her advice. These consultations, however, were innocently outspoken and above-board; so that Aunt Gilchrist could easily guess at what was in her opponent's hand; and again and again her shrill laugh of triumph rang out as she swept in the coppers from before the angry Doctor's nose. It was a very frank and honest game of poker that was played by these simple folk; and as the "ante" was one halfpenny, and the limit of betting three-pence, there was no deadly destruction dealt to anybody.

It was during the progress of this happy-go-lucky game, however, that Alison incidentally made a notable discovery. Flora had ventured upon a bold piece of bluffing—a dangerous experiment for any one with such an expressive face, and such merry, conscious, tell-tale eyes ; the Doctor, at the instigation of his wife, refused to be intimidated ; the young lady was “called,” and found to be queen high, and the pool was raked in.

“Ah, you thought you were playing with Ludovick, did you !” her brother said scornfully. “When she’s playing against Ludovick she bluffs like the very mischief, for he always gives up. That’s not the game at all ! If he held four aces, he’d pretend he was afraid of her, and put in his cards. The other night it was quite ridiculous ; I’m certain he was only pretending he held bad hands.”

“Wait a little while, Hugh,” his mother

said, with a quiet smile. "You may find yourself just as willing as any other young man to lose at cards when you want to make yourself agreeable."

"What stuff all that is, unless the girl's a fool!" Master Hugh retorted. "To be flattered by being allowed to win at cards! Besides, it's spoiling the game for other people."

As fresh hands were being dealt, nothing further was said on the subject; but this brief conversation had revealed to Alison not only that Ludovick Macdonell was in his own country, but that he had been in this very house a night or two before. And for a moment her surprise that he had not come to see her on her arrival was accompanied by a sudden fear that she had offended him somehow. It was but for a moment. Perhaps in Kirk o' Shields, sitting alone with her silent reveries, she might have alarmed herself with some

such surmise, and tortured herself over it, and longed for some explanation. But here, among these simple, good-natured, well-contented folk, amid this babblement of laughter and harmless wrangling, she dismissed it forthwith. Ludovick was her friend: she need not mistrust him. He would tell her why it was he had not come to welcome her. Or rather, was not the reason sufficiently apparent? He did not want to embarrass her. It was consideration for her that kept him away—even as it was a kind of delicacy on the part of her cousins that bade them refrain from speaking of him to her. But he would make his appearance in good time, when there was no risk of embarrassment. All things were well. She felt herself very happy and safe in this little dining-room, among these kind folk. And Ludovick would be coming to see her one of these days; and she thought she would be able

to give him a more frank and friendly greeting now. There was nothing to frighten her, here in Lochaber. Indeed, she would try to make up to him for any restraint of manner she might have shown in Kirk o' Shields. Amid the noise of this most unscientific game she sat and looked on; but she saw something more than the cards: she saw Ludovick Macdonell coming forward to meet her—it might be in this very room—it might be on the white roadway outside—but in his eyes there was the pleasant smile that she knew of old; and this time she would *not* withhold her hand.

And some such vision was still before her, long after the noise of the poker-party had ceased, and long after the house had sunk into profound silence and slumber. She was now in her own room, seated at the window, breathing the soft cool air that floated up from the shore, and watch-

ing the mysterious pallid glow in the sky and on the wide water—that no-man’s-land of twilight that in these regions lies between the lingering evening and the coming of the dawn. The hills on the other side of the loch had slowly wrapped themselves in impenetrable gloom—no single feature of rock or tree visible—the deep olive-green grown so dark as to be almost indistinguishable; but over them the heavens were of a clear and pearly gray, with one or two clouds, of softest purple, hanging motionless there; while the sleeping loch was of a wan and livid blue, with the various boats and yachts, lying on that still surface, appearing so strangely vivid that they seemed to have been carved out of jet. Not a leaf stirred in the garden; not a ripple whispered along the seaweed fringe of the beach. Far into the night she sat, half dreaming, but wholly satisfied and content; for she was in the enchanted

land again ; her heart was full of peace—
as serene and full of peace as this wide,
silent, beautiful world out there ; and she
had assured herself that all was well.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EXPEDITION.

WHEN Alison looked out next morning she observed the boy Johnny engaged in raking smooth the gravel-path; and she was pleased to see him thus industriously occupied; and hoped that he had abandoned the inveterate indolence which used to possess him. And it seemed hard that just at this moment three graceless loons, coming along from the town, should set to work to jeer at John. What offence, if any, he had given them, she could not make out—partly because her window was shut, and partly because the altercation, insulting on the one side, and scornful on

the other, was carried on in Gaelic. It ended by the three of them making derisive gestures with their fingers, the further to exasperate Johnny; and then—the tallest of the lads having picked up a clod of earth and flung it at him by way of playful farewell—the idle vagabonds went on.

Johnny regarded his retreating foes with a gloomy deliberation. They did not wholly disappear. Alison could see them indulging in all kinds of horse-play farther along the road; then they went down to the edge of the loch and began to throw stones at a bit of floating wood. At the same moment she saw John put aside his rake and come back to the house; and as she judged that he had resolved to treat these tomfools with proper contempt, by paying no more heed to them, she turned to look at the beds of yellow pansies, and the masses of orange nasturtiums, and the blue lobelia borders, which were all very

bright and cheerful in the morning sunlight.

But presently Johnny reappeared ; and she perceived that he had in his hand an old straw hat. This he left at the gate ; and then—with a furtive look in the direction of his enemies—he stole across the road, went down the beach, picked up a large stone, and quickly returned. He then took that battered old straw hat, and placed it in the middle of the highway—but with the big stone carefully concealed inside. That done, he came back to the garden, shut the gate, and locked it, and took up a place of observation behind a couple of fuchsia-bushes, where he could see without easily being seen.

Johnny's dark and subtle anticipations proved correct—his enemies were not going far ; very soon they were perceived to be returning along the road, with all kinds of gambolling and boisterous non-

sense. But no sooner did they notice the old hat lying there than they simultaneously made a rush for it, struggling and hauling at each other as to which should have the first kick. By this time Johnny had thrown himself prone on his face, just behind the little parapet of stone supporting the railings which were the garden frontage, where also was a row of fuchsia-bushes. He could hear, but he could not see; neither could he be seen—except by Alison, who was a spectator of the whole performance. It was the tallest of the lads—he who had thrown the clod of earth at Johnny—who managed to shake off his two companions, and secure the coveted first kick. He came on with a rush; then there was a crack! but instead of the tattered hat flying into the air, behold! a big stone rolled away along the road, while the enraged and astonished youth caught up his leg with both hands, and clinched

his teeth outside his underlip in a manner betokening extreme dissatisfaction. Even through the shut window Alison could hear the roars of derision set up by his companions ; and she could see that Johnny, lying snug behind the fuchsia-bushes, was entirely convulsed with fiendish laughter, rolling and shaking, and digging his elbows into the ground. The injured youth outside regarded the house and its surroundings with malevolent and vindictive eyes ; but of course there was no one to be seen. He even limped painfully up to the gate and shook it ; and it might have gone hard with Master John if he had been discovered ; but the gate was locked. So there was nothing for that lamed and sobered young man but to hobble away back to Fort William—no doubt delighting his companions with his contortions of pain and his curses and vows of vengeance.

But there was harder work than gravel-

raking in store for Master Johnny that day. The three cousins had planned an expedition to a little lake far away among the hills—Flora desirous of getting some water-lilies, and Hugh looking forward to an hour or two's fly-fishing ; while upon Johnny devolved the double task of carrying the luncheon-basket and rowing the boat. Alison wanted Aunt Gilchrist to accompany them ; but the wild escapades which the little dame had been promising herself were being postponed from day to day, through some uneasy suspicion that Periphery was merely asleep with one eye open. Aunt Gilchrist went with them as far as they could drive ; then the waggonette set out for home again, carrying her with it ; and the three cousins were left to climb the hill towards this solitary tarn, the faithful Johnny struggling manfully upward with the luncheon-basket on his shoulder.

The morning was singularly bright and breezy—indeed, Flora was much surer of getting her water-lilies than Hugh was of getting any fly-fishing, for the wind was blowing hard and there was an abundant sunlight everywhere. When at last they came in sight of the little loch there was a picture before them that would have delighted the eye of anybody but an angler. Set in a cup of the hills this small tarn was surrounded by soft green slopes, some of them covered with birch and some with bracken ; while along the shores ran a circle of tall rushes that were bending and swaying in successive waves ; and then another belt of water-lilies, whose broad leaves were all lifting and flapping in the wind, while the big white stars of flowers moved slowly hither and thither. For there was a brisk gale blowing ; and the water of the lake, naturally of a deep brown, was driven into a rich purple-blue,

that became quite ruddy in the shallows. Everywhere there was a restless change and movement—a universal shimmering and rustling—the fierce gusts striking down on the marshy banks where the sand-brown grass, the tall loosestrife, and the meadowsweet bent before the blast, and then widening out upon the racing and hurrying waves that dashed with a fringe of white along the leeward shore. It was all very bright and beautiful, no doubt—the keen blue sky overhead, the brilliant sunlight, the purple loch amid those fair green slopes ; but there was not much prospect of fly-fishing.

In the mean time Johnny was despatched to the other end of the loch to bring across the boat ; and a fine sight it was to see him trying to drive that heavy craft against wind and water. For a space it would seem as if he were making progress ; then one of those black squalls would

strike down, tearing the racing waves along with it ; and Johnny would come to a sudden standstill, even when he was not carried to leeward.

“ His laziness is having his work cut out for him this time ! ” Hugh said grimly, as he watched the spray springing white at the bows of the slow-labouring boat.

“ Then why don't you call to him to put back, and you could go and help him ? ” Alison naturally asked.

“ That would be no use—only one can pull in that boat,” was the answer. “ But a dose of hard work does Johnny a power of good. He thinks over it for days after ; and that leaves him less time for plotting mischief.”

Nevertheless, the lad John had a heavy pair of shoulders, and eventually he managed to bring the boat along to the broad bed of water-lilies, through which he had to force it by using one of the oars

as a pole. When at last he had got the bow securely jammed into the soft bank, he stepped ashore.

"Well, Johnny, is there any wind out there?" Hugh asked of him, in playful fashion.

Johnny ruefully looked at the palms of his hands.

"If there wass mich more o' this," said he, "I think I would need to go to the smiddy, and ask them to mek me a pair of iron hands."

"Why, man, it's fine exercise for you!" his master said.

"I do not know about that," said John, regarding with a kind of sullen reproach the farther end of the loch and the lashing waves; "but I know this, that if you wass down yonder you would think the Duffle himself was in the water, and trying to drive the boat ashore."

Indeed, from the comparative calm that

prevailed here among the rushes and lilies it was impossible for any one to judge of the force of wind and water farther out—as the three cousins were presently to discover. For as soon as Hugh had got his tackle ready they all embarked, and slowly pushed their way through the tangled mass of stems and broad leaves. This was all very well, and Hugh had even begun to cast, when it was found that the boat was beginning to drift down the loch with a marvellous rapidity. As they had neither an anchor nor a bit of rope, their only resource was to get Johnny to pull against the wind; but perhaps Johnny's previous struggle had exhausted him; or perhaps he was beginning to think he had had enough of this useless labour: anyhow, the boat kept drifting over Hugh's flies, which he could only recover in a helpless manner.

“Pull harder, Johnny!” the impatient

fisherman cried. "Don't let the boat drift so fast."

Thereupon John made a further pretence of pulling very hard indeed ; but still the boat was careering down the wind, and getting momentarily into rougher water.

"How do you like this, John?" Alison inquired, with a gentle smile.

"I wish I was in my bed sleeping," Johnny answered gloomily, as he laboured away at the cumbrous oars.

"Sleeping in the middle of the day?" she asked.

"Well, sleeping is better for you than rowing, at any time," he answered sullenly.

But perhaps this discontent of John's was in a measure affected—just as there was a good deal of pretence about his hard rowing—for presently he was heard to say—

"Cosh, I think this is the loch where the Duffle comes up to get a drink ; and

when he finds a boat on it, he's angry, and he shoves her about below. I would need a pair of iron shoulders as well as iron hands to pull a boat on this loch !”

Whatever the matter was, it was clear that Johnny could not hold his own against the gale ; fishing was out of the question ; and they had only now to consider where they could let themselves be driven ashore without getting wet with spray. Fortunately they espied a little bay that was partly sheltered by its abundance of rushes ; and here the boat was run in out of the tempest, and securely fastened to the bank. Hugh took out his fly-book and began to go over the leaves in idle thought ; the girls went away to gather an armful of meadowsweet for home decoration ; and John, sitting on the gunwale of the boat, morosely gazed out upon the loch that had given him such a dose of hard work, and all for nothing.

Presently Flora called aloud—

“Hugh, isn’t that Ludovick away over yonder?”

They could make out the figure of some one crossing a distant bracken-covered ridge.

“Very likely,” was the answer.

Flora turned to Alison with an air of studied indifference.

“I think it very likely too. He knew we were coming to this loch to-day. And somehow all our expeditions get mis-managed when Ludovick isn’t with us. You’ll see he’ll be able to do something for us.”

Alison heard, but did not answer; she was a little tremulous and breathless; she dared not raise her eyes. And yet this was not fear that filled her heart—not fear at all, but rather a kind of gladness and joyful anticipation. With all this brilliant, blowing day around her, with these pleasant

companions, and with Ludovick himself coming in this casual fashion to see what they were after, there seemed no occasion for any hesitating doubts or fears. She was ready to welcome him ; she hoped he would think her welcome of him friendly. And if she did not care to watch that solitary figure coming across the slopes of heather and bracken (for Flora was standing by), she seemed to know well enough that this was Captain Ludovick, and that presently the little party of four would be together again, just as in the olden, never-to-be-forgotten days.

“ Yes, it's Ludovick : let's go back to the boat,” Flora said ; and back to the boat they went, to deposit their wild-flowers there, while the new-comer's long, swinging stride was bringing him rapidly towards them.

“ How do you do, Miss Alison ? I'm glad to see you back again in Lochaber,”

he said, in a very pleasant and friendly way ; but his eyes did not rest on her more than a second ; he immediately turned to Hugh and Flora.

A chill of disappointment struck home to her heart. Was this the long-expected meeting, then ? Was this his welcome of her—this couple of half-indifferent phrases, and hardly a single glance ? He had given her no opportunity of showing that she wished to be kind to him—that she had no fear now—that she claimed the friendship he had promised. He was talking to Hugh ; and Hugh was explaining that Johnny could not hold the boat against the wind, so that the fishing had scarcely been tried.

“ Oh, as for that,” Macdonell said promptly, “ I’ll pull the boat for you. I don’t know that it will be of much use—the fish won’t rise in squally weather like this. However, you may as well try it,

now you're here ; and if you put on a big fly we'll troll up the middle of the loch, and then you can put on your other flies again and we'll drift down the side."

"But, Ludovick," said Flora, "Alison and I may as well stop ashore, and there'll be less weight in the boat."

"Not at all!" he protested. "You come and see the fun—you never know what may happen. But Johnny can stop ashore."

"Johnny will not be sorry," said Miss Flora, with a pleasant smile.

"No, I will not be sorry," Johnny said, mostly to himself, in answer to her sarcasm—and he was morosely looking out on the dark and driven water. "It is no use trying the fishing. The Duffle is in that loch ; and the fish are all aweh hom."

Despite this evil augury, the four companions got into the boat, and presently they were making their way through the

rushes out into the open loch. And very soon it appeared that this new gillie was of a much more powerful build than his predecessor—though he seemed to set about his self-imposed duties in a very free and easy manner. Notwithstanding that the waves were striking heavily at the bows, and that those black squalls came whirling along every minute or two, he managed to keep a fairly steady way on the boat, and apparently without much trouble to himself; and if they could not induce a fish to follow the trailing fly, at least they succeeded in getting up to the head of the loch, where the drifting was to begin. And in this drifting, too, it seemed quite easy for him to hold the boat just as he wished, so that Hugh industriously fished all down the one side of the loch—not casting, but merely lifting the flies so that the wind carried them out. But their conjoint labour was of no avail. The

trout would not rise. The squalls and heavy water had frightened them, and they had gone below, or into the safety of the reeds. So there was nothing for it but to run the boat once more into that sheltered little bay—and to get forth the luncheon-basket.

Now, this ought to have been a very pleasant little luncheon-party, in this snug retreat ; and Flora and Hugh were merry enough ; but Alison could not help being a little surprised and hurt by the distant courtesy with which Captain Ludovick appeared to treat her. She felt that she was not on the same footing with him as were Flora and Hugh. All his laughing stories were told to them. He rarely addressed her, except when civility demanded ; still more rarely did their eyes meet. Did he want to punish her, then, for her refusal ? Or did this coldness arise from an excess of courtesy—from his

determination that no revival of his former attentions should embarrass her? Anyhow, it seemed hard that she should be thus left out, in however indefinable a way.

In the afternoon, however, an incident occurred that for a time at least interrupted these strained and formal relations. Having waited in vain for the wind to lessen, they thought they would give the loch one more trial before going home; and as before, Ludovick Macdonell offered his services as gillie. They had got up to the head of the loch, and were drifting down before the squally breeze, when Hugh, noticing that his flies had not fallen quite straight, unthinkingly twitched them out of the water to make an ordinary cast over his shoulder. To have done this successfully, with these heavy gusts blowing, would have demanded some little exercise of strength and also of dexterity; but, as it was, this careless backward cast

did not get the line out at all—in fact, it was blown down in a heap upon the boat and its occupants. At the same instant Alison uttered a brief quick cry of pain ; instinctively she covered her eye with her hand ; and Hugh, wheeling round in dismay, perceived where one of his flies had caught. His face turned deadly white—far whiter than hers, indeed—and he was quite paralyzed with fear : it was Ludovick Macdonell who took Alison's hand and gently removed it.

“You must let me look,” he said to her, and he held her hand lest she should put it back. To his great relief he found that the hook had not entered the eye ; but it had caught the edge of the under eyelid, and was lightly fixed there.

“Tell Hugh not to mind,” was the first thing she said—as if she were already blind, and speaking of some distant person whom she could not see.

“ But you needn’t be frightened, Alison,” Ludovick said to her, with eager assurance, though he himself was in considerable doubt as to what should be done. “ The hook is not in your eye ; it has only caught the eyelid. Hugh, have you got a pair of scissors in your fly-book ? ”

It was with trembling fingers that the wretched lad got out the pair of scissors, and handed them to Macdonell, who as a preliminary measure snipped the casting line close to the fly. Then he said to her—

“ Look here, Alison, I believe I could take it out myself, now, and without hurting you much, if you cared to run the risk ; but perhaps it will be safer to wait until we get back to Fort William, and then the Doctor can make certain of it.”

“ I would rather you would take it out,” she said calmly enough.

“ No, Alison, no ! ” Flora entreated.

"Don't run any risk! Wait till we get home!"

"It would be safer," Captain Ludovick said—but he was still addressing Alison, "except for this—that the hook might work itself farther in."

"I would like you to take it out now, if you would be so kind," she said to him simply.

"Well, if you like to trust me—but it will hurt a little," he said.

"I don't mind that," she answered.

And still he hesitated; for it was something of a responsibility; besides, he did not know how much pain he might inflict—and how much more gladly would he have borne it himself!

"I would rather cut it out of my own finger," he said, "even if it was in both barb and shank. Are you quite sure you won't draw back your head when you find me take hold of the hook?"

“I shall not move.”

For safety's sake he put one hand on her shoulder ; but she was firm enough ; she did not flinch a hair's-breadth even when she felt him cautiously take hold of the hook.

“Are you ready, Alison ?”

“Yes.”

“Quite ?”

“Quite.”

Then there was a quick little jerk. She uttered no cry ; she merely kept her eyes closed until Flora called to her joyously—

“Alison, it's all right ! Ludovick has got it out !—it's all right, isn't it ?”

The girl opened her eyes, which were moist with the pain caused by that sudden twitch ; but even through these involuntary tears she could smile her thanks to the operator—and her eyes were expressive enough when she chose.

“I hope I didn't hurt you much,” said

he, "but really it was better to get it out at once: you've no idea how horrid a thing it is to cut a hook out, when once the barb has got right in. Take your handkerchief now, Alison, and dip it in the water, and bathe your eye a little. Why, there's hardly a speck—just the smallest bit of skin torn away. I wish I had a looking-glass of some kind."

"Why?" she asked.

He smiled a little—indeed he seemed quite gratified over the success of his experiment, and was talking at random and carelessly now.

"Well, it was this way: I was living in a rather dilapidated shooting-lodge up in Ross-shire, and one evening the ceiling of the kitchen fell in. There was a mighty noise; and of course we all rushed to the place; and then we found that the plaster had knocked down a young servant-girl who happened to be there, and she was lying

senseless—though it turned out she was more frightened than hurt. I noticed this, though, that when everything was being done to reassure the unfortunate creature after she came to, the old house-keeper did best of all—she ran away and got a hand-glass, and made the girl look in it to convince herself that she was not disfigured in any way. I thought the old woman had some knowledge of human nature.”

“Then I will be your hand-glass, Alison !” Flora cried quite joyfully. “And I declare to you that there’s nothing but a small pink scratch—oh, hardly bigger than a pin’s head ! Disfigurement ? Nothing of the kind. And you’re looking just as nice and trim and provokingly neat as ever, if that is any comfort to you !”

Alison laughed a little ; but there was still gratitude in her eyes as she obeyed Ludovick’s directions as to the use of the wet handkerchief.

This was the end of the fishing, or attempted fishing—indeed, the boat had meanwhile drifted down and imbedded itself in a mass of water-lilies; so they got ashore and prepared for their march down through the hills to the spot where the waggonette was awaiting them. Hugh was deeply mortified and apologetic; again and again he returned to the subject, upbraiding his own stupidity, until Alison had seriously to ask him what it was she had suffered. But he was not to be comforted; and when everything was ready he walked off by himself, and would have gone on by himself, only that Flora hastened to overtake him, and give him of her sisterly sympathy and remonstrance. The consequence of this arrangement was that Captain Ludovick and Alison brought up the rear by themselves, for the boy John had gone forward some time before with the luncheon-basket.

And then Alison took heart of grace.

"I don't think you were very friendly with me this morning," she said, with her eyes cast down.

He seemed a little surprised.

"I hope I was not unfriendly," he said. "But—but I thought it was better that I should let you understand that I did not mean to harass you—or—or vex you."

"You promised that we were to be firm and fast friends," she said a little proudly.

"Yes?" he said.

"And yet you called me 'Miss Alison' all the morning—until you had to take the hook out of my eyelid," she continued, with growing confidence—for it seemed so easy and natural to talk to him here: she was quite resolved on having a thorough understanding with him, if he wished it also.

"Do you think I like to call you 'Miss' Alison?" he responded. "No, I don't.

I think of you as Alison ; and I suppose I might as well say it. But I did not wish to embarrass you."

"Well, you wouldn't embarrass me by calling me Alison," she said, as they walked on together.

"It will be a great deal more pleasant for me," he made answer again. "Mind you, I want to be to you, now and always, just what you wish me to be. You gave me your last word, and I accepted it ; and my mouth is shut—until—well, I am not going to risk anything by speaking. Let our friendship be as close and firm and fast as it can be. But I wonder if you would be offended, Alison, if I told you something about yourself?"

She raised her eyes, and met his bravely.

"Offended? I am sure *not*," she said.

"Well, then," said he, with a trace of shyness that rather became him, "I can't help thinking that you are a far more

human kind of a being when you are in the Highlands ; and sometimes I can't help thinking of what might happen if only you were always living among us."

CHAPTER VIII.

PRINCESS DEIRDRI.

THAT, at all events, she was a very different kind of being up in these regions was very well known to herself; for whether it was the fresh air and exercise, or the cheerful society and constant occupation, or the delight of looking at the beautiful things surrounding her, or all of these combined, certain it is that the whole day long a sort of elation seemed to thrill through her to the very finger-tips. Every moment was full of life. Even when she was away alone—up among the hills whither she used to climb in order to have a view of the wider waters in the

south—there was no sadness in her mind, but rather a sense of jubilation, and thankfulness, and content with all the world. The wildest days of gloom, so far from having any terror for her, exercised over her a singular fascination; she rejoiced in the foreboding of the storm; she welcomed the coming of this terrible unknown thing that darkened the heavens and the earth. For what might not these sombre mountains bring forth—the great masses of them in communion with the lowering clouds, and here and there retreating behind a mystic veil of rain? The driven sea—its lurid green broken by white flashes of foam—and the wind that tore by her in sudden gusts and squalls seemed awful and threatening; and yet she had no fear of them; rather they made her strong to withstand, and defiant, and even proud of their angry and vengeful look. Then, sometimes, a soft sun-touched hill-side

would slowly emerge from behind those gray mists of showers, and a rainbow would declare itself against the purple masses of the clouds ; and here and there the running sea would be struck a vivid green by following shafts of light. And then all this changing phantasmagoria was quite near to her ; not remote and passively picturesque like the views of Switzerland she had seen ; but quite close around her, and she part of them, and mysteriously associated with them, a child of the universe like themselves. No, even in these wild days of storm and tempest she had no fear ; these winds and clouds and sun-swept seas were friendly things ; she loved to be alone with them, and listen to their strange uncertain voices. Sometimes she wondered whether they understood her, and her presence there, any better than she understood them.

And the glooms and terrors and anxious

perplexities of Kirk o' Shields? She had forgotten them! She had forgotten that Ludovick Macdonell was a Roman Catholic, a dangerous person, in league with priests and persecutors, a worshipper of the scarlet woman, the woman drunken with the blood of the Saints. She was too light-hearted and busy to think of such things; the present moment was full of gladness and occupation; when she looked in his face, and met his frank and pleasant smile, she did not remember anything about the scarlet woman and the beast that came out of the bottomless pit. When he was walking by her side along the shores of Loch Eil, or telling her stories in the stern of Hugh's lug-sail boat, or giving her a hand at the steep places of the hill-side, why, he was just Ludovick!—and she did not bother her head about anything else. And it must be said that the companionship of these two had become a

very pronounced and notorious thing. They made no kind of concealment about it—Alison least of all. They were continually together, during the long walks and drives, when they went on sailing expeditions, as they sat in the garden on these clear and still summer evenings, or went in-doors to see how that mild game of poker was going on. He did not address himself much to her, nor she to him; but somehow they were never very far away from each other; and they seemed entirely satisfied with this half-silent comradeship. It was “Alison” and “Ludovick” now; they were as belonging to the one family, along with Flora and Hugh; and the various excuses that Captain Ludovick made for coming over from Oyre and planning new excursions were simply innumerable; while even during his brief absences there was always some reminder of his existence and of his

remembrance making its way to the house in which Alison lived.

It was altogether a very extraordinary state of affairs. But for the name of the thing, they were to all outward appearance conducting themselves precisely as a pair of affianced lovers, and that without any concealment or embarrassment. Nominally they were merely friends, of course ; but this friendship that Alison had boldly claimed, and that Captain Ludovick was in nowise inclined to withhold, seemed to be of an extremely devoted and exclusive kind. And not only did the other members of the household tacitly acquiesce in these relations, but Aunt Gilchrist in especial looked on with open approval. She no longer appeared to regard Captain Macdonell as a possible fortune-hunter. The fact is, she had indignantly resented the insolence, as she deemed it, of the Cowan family in endeavouring to carry

away her ward, her especial charge, to marry her to that poor voiceless probationer; and she had given everybody to understand that she, Jane Gilchrist, meant to put her foot down upon that little scheme. She intimated plainly enough that she had already made some kind of settlement upon Alison, and that she had not the slightest intention of allowing any portion of her money to find its way into the pockets of the "stickit minister."

"No, no! Alison, my dear," the old dame said openly. "I'm a wilful woman when I take anything into my head; and I tell ye I'm ready to defy the whole o' that congregation—elders, deacons, precentors, and all the rest of them!"

"Yes, Aunt Gilchrist," Alison said, with a smile, "it's easy to defy them when you don't live among them."

"Ay, is that it?" the old lady said, with a sharp look. "Are ye feared to go

back? Well, just tell them that I'll maybe not let ye go back. Tell them I've bought ye for my own. You're nothing but a white slave. And I should not wonder if I did not let ye marry at all."

"I'm sure I don't want to get married, aunt," said Alison cheerfully; "I am very happy as I am."

"Oh yes," Aunt Gilchrist made answer, half to herself. "They all say that! But it's wonderful how quick they can change their mind when the occasion comes."

Nothing further was said just then, for at this moment Captain Ludovick happened to make his appearance, driving up the waggonette that belonged to Oyre. They were all bound on an expedition into the Braes of Lochaber—the excuse this time being that the horses at Oyre did not get nearly enough exercise; and as everything was ready, the whole of the party forthwith took their places. By

rights Aunt Gilchrist should have been given the post of honour next the driver ; but as she declared she preferred going inside, it was remarkable with what equanimity Alison, at Captain Ludovick's suggestion, got up and occupied the seat beside him. After all, she was a kind of stranger and guest ; and no doubt Captain Ludovick wanted to point out to her the objects of interest along the road.

It was a pleasant morning for setting out ; the distant village of Corpach was shining white among its scattered trees ; and the little gray monument to Colonel Cameron of Fassiefern could be seen distinctly enough under the velvet-soft slopes of the hills. They drove out and past the ruins of Inverlochy Castle, that seemed to have grown dark with tradition and tales of strife and slaughter ; and by-and-by, when they had got away to the north of Ben Nevis, they entered a wild

moorland country—the long, bare undulations bounded by dark green pine-woods, and these again leading the eye up to the loftier hills, that were all picturesquely dappled with sunshine and shadow. This in truth was rather a monotonous highway—its chief feature being the roadside cairns of stones built up where a funeral procession had rested the coffin on their way to the churchyard in the lonely glen ; and perhaps it was the sight of these rude memorials that induced Captain Ludovick to tell his companion the sad story of Princess Deirdri, whose name is supposed to linger in that of the vitrified fort, Dundearduil, in Glen Nevis. The beautiful Irish princess, as some may care to know, was beloved of King Connacher of Ulster, but she would have nothing to do with him, seeing that he was old and ugly, red-haired and squint-eyed, whereupon Connacher shut her up in prison. But there were three

young men, nephews of the king, who were sorry for the captive princess; and they succeeded in freeing her, and in escaping along with a party of followers across the seas to the western Highlands, where they settled first of all upon the shores of Loch Etive. Whether Naos, one of the three brothers, and the Princess Deirdri had been in love with each other before they forsook their native country is not stated; however, in this new land they did love each other, and were married, and lived in great happiness. After several years the King of Ulster professed to forgive them, and invited them to go home again; and the Princess Deirdri was against that, having anxious forebodings of treachery; but eventually they persuaded her to go. It was on her voyage across the seas that she composed her lament on leaving the various places where she had been so happy; and the story tells how all

her companions were moved to tears as she sang—

*“ Glen Etive, O Glen Etive,
There was raised my earliest home,
Beautiful were its woods on rising,
When the sun fell on Glen Etive !*

* * * *

*Glenorchy, O Glenorchy,
The straight glen of smooth ridges ;
No man of his age was so joyful
As my Naos in Glenorchy !*

* * * *

*Glenmassan, O Glenmassan,
Long its grass, and fair its woodland glades ;
All to ourselves was the place of our repose
On grassy Invermassan !”*

Deirdri's mournful anticipations proved correct ; Connacher, finding her more beautiful than ever, straightway slew her husband, hoping to win her for himself ; but the faithful princess did not linger behind—she managed to borrow a knife from a boatman, plunged it into her bosom, and fell dead on her husband's corpse, so that the lovers went together into lands

still more unknown than even the far Glen Etive and Lochaber.

Such was the substance of the tale he told her ; and then he went on to say—

“ I knew of another Princess Deirdri, though whenever I think of her I suffer a pretty sharp twinge of remorse. This is how it was. I was once at a small shooting-box right away up in the highest region of the Monaghlea hills—the most lonely and unfrequented place you could imagine—and one morning we were up in the corries driving the woods for black game. The beaters were just getting to the end of a drive, when a young roebuck came flashing out of the bushes and crossed me about thirty yards off—it was an easy shot, and I dropped him. But the next moment I began to wonder at any roe-deer being so high up in the hills, for they generally keep to the woods and glens farther down ; so when the keepers came

along, I asked them. Then I found out what I had done. Quite early in the summer a young buck and a young doe had come straying up into these wilds, and I suppose they had taken a fancy to the neighbourhood, for they remained there, though none of the rest of the herd ever followed them. They had the whole place to themselves; and when the keepers happened to come on them they were always found together, either feeding about among the rocks or lying on the warm heather. This morning the beaters had again stumbled on them; but the doe had doubled back and escaped; it was the young buck that unfortunately came within reach of my gun—and there that idyl ended. I was mighty sorry for it, I can tell you,” he continued, as they were leisurely driving along. “I’ve often thought of the fine time those two must have had together—for it is a very pretty

place up there—lovely little glens, and clear streams, and birch-woods—and all that summer they had the whole district to themselves. And a very handsome young roebuck he was too: I've got his head mounted at Oyre. But I've never shot a roe-deer since."

"And what became of the other one?" Alison asked.

"Well, she was seen about the woods for some little time after, and then she disappeared. I suppose she went back to the herd; and I sometimes wonder whether that Princess Deirdri used to think of the happy days she spent with her Naos up in the Corrie-nan-Shean. I don't like to think of that idyl of the hills—but it has saved the life of many a roebuck since."

Now, the hapless young Irish princess came into their talk still once again that day, and in this wise. They had driven

away along Glen Spean (and it was with no little interest that she regarded Keppoch House, for she had come to know a good deal about the Macdonells of Keppoch, and their deeds of other days) until they came to Bridge of Roy ; and as this was the end of their drive they stopped at the solitary little inn ; the horses were taken out while they went inside to order lunch. But luncheon in the Highlands is not supposed to be complete without boiled potatoes ; and while these were being got ready, Captain Ludovick and Alison went out for a stroll about the place, their wandering footsteps eventually leading them down to the river. They talked of various things, but only now and again, for this companionship of theirs seemed to suffice without any effort at mutual entertainment ; and when at length they reached the bridge they paused there, and Alison, the better to look down into the rocky chasm through

which the clear brown water flowed, placed both arms on the rude stone parapet, and bent her head over. Nothing was said for some time ; she was used to silence, and content with it ; it was enough for her that Ludovick was near.

But presently he took hold of her hand, and she did not withdraw it, as, in their present relations, she ought to have done.

“Alison,” said he, “isn’t it about time to have done with this make-believe ?”

She flushed quickly, and raised her head a little bit, so that she could see his face if she chose.

“What make-believe ?” she asked, though well she knew.

“The pretence of being only friends,” he answered. “I love you ; I think you love me : what is the use of hiding it ?”

“What is the use of anything else ?” she said rather wistfully. Then she raised her head somewhat, and spoke with greater

cheerfulness : "Are we not happy enough as we are, Ludovick ?"

"As we are !" he exclaimed. "Yes, this is all very well—and it's very pleasant for us to be continually together—but don't you sometimes look forward a little bit ? It's very pleasant for me to be seeing you nearly every day, and to be with you for hours and hours at a stretch ; but how long will it last ? You will be going away. You won't be so happy then, will you ? I shall not, I know. And for yourself, Alison, don't you rather think you will be like the Princess Deirdri when she was bidding good-bye to all the places she had known ; and don't you think you will look back more than once to the days when you and I were together here ? But there won't be so much happiness then."

Her eyes were filled with sudden tears ; she turned away her head.

"Indeed I know that," she said, in a

low voice that was rather uncertain. "I have—gone through that before."

"Very well," said he, at once, "let us take the other way. What is the use of concealment? There is no use in it any longer. Let me write this very evening to your father, and I will tell him that you and I mean to get married—what can be simpler than that?"

She suddenly rose erect, and faced him with frightened eyes.

"Oh no, I couldn't do that!" she said breathlessly. "I couldn't, Ludovick!—I—I daren't!"

"Very well," said he gently. "Perhaps that is too much—too abrupt. But what I want to do is to convince you that you entirely exaggerate the horror which your friends and relatives would exhibit if they were told you were going to marry a Catholic. I don't believe they would show any horror at all. It is the Catholic doc-

trines and ritual they hold in abhorrence ; and they would know well enough that neither would concern you in the least—that you need have nothing to do with either. Then your family have seen me—they know I haven't cloven feet and horns——”

“I did not tell them you were a Catholick, Ludovick,” she said rather ruefully.

“I wish now you had,” he made answer. “But never mind. Here is my proposal. Perhaps making the announcement in that way to your father would be too abrupt. But I want to get you to believe that there will be no such wild dismay as you expect. Very well : write to your sister Agnes, and tell her frankly all about it. Confide in her. You will see what she says ; and I am pretty certain it won't alarm you.”

She looked up again with more hopefulness in her eyes.

"I thought of it once, Ludovick," she said rather shyly.

"Do it now, then—this evening," said he. "But, then, do it the right way. Don't put it before her as if it were some vague proposition that might as well be dismissed, for the better comfort of everybody concerned. Alison," he continued, regarding her, "you will tell her that the relationship between you and me is something beyond recall. It is so, is it not?"

He could hardly hear her answer.

"I—I hope so, Ludovick."

He grasped her hand more tightly than ever.

"Then let this be the first step, my darling; and you will see that your fears will vanish away one by one. You have courage enough for anything—I can see it every day—and why not for this? Come away now—yonder is Flora at the door of the inn, waving a handkerchief for us.

And don't you forget to tell everything quite frankly to your sister."

As they were walking back to the inn she looked up to him with a smile.

"Do you know, Ludovick," said she, "that when I am with you, when I hear you talking, I have no fears at all! Everything seems quite simple and easy."

And indeed when they had returned to the inn, and all of them were seated round the table in the little parlour, no one could have imagined from her manner that any very serious conversation had taken place between these two on Roy Bridge. She was quite animated and cheerful; and submitted to some raillery on the part of Aunt Gilchrist with the greatest of good-humour. It is true that during the long drive home she was somewhat silent; and the moment she entered the house she went to her own room, and remained there for a considerable time. And when she

came out again and despatched Johnny to the post-office with the letter she had written, she seemed restless and uneasy ; and she even lingered about the front garden, pretending to examine the various shrubs, until he had actually come back again. But when she had ascertained from him that the letter had been definitely and irretrievably posted, her countenance cleared considerably ; and, probably to make light of her previous disquietude, she casually asked John whether he had ever been to Bridge of Roy.

“No, mem, it’s a long weh from here,” said John.

But seeing that Alison did not immediately dismiss him, Johnny made bold to ask her if she had been at the burial-ground that morning when they were up in the Braes.

“What burial-ground, Johnny ?” she inquired of him.

“Well, I am not remembering the name of it,” said Johnny, after a moment’s pause, “but it is up in the hills whateffer, and many’s the time I hef heard of it. The old people used to be buried there for years and years. But what I hef been told is thus,” John continued, with a demure twinkle in his eye, “that they were burying a Protestant in that place, where there wass none but Catholics pefore; and ever after that at night there wass a terrible noise of clashing of swords and shields and dirks; and ahl the people living there were frightened to go by that way. Oh, a terrible noise it wass; and when they went to the Free Church minister—well, mebbe he wass not believing the story, but he could do nothing at ahl; and the darker the night the more ahful the clashing and the noise. Cosh, I think the Protestant man was a ferry good fighter, when the whole of them could not put him

out! And then it grew to be so bad that they had to send for a Catholic priest; and he brought some holy water with him, and said the prayers over the ground, and now it is ahl quate again. But I know I would not like to be going near that place at night."

"Are you a Protestant or a Catholic, Johnny?" Alison asked, with a kind of new interest.

Johnny looked at her inquiringly for a second.

"What will you be for being yourself, mem?" he said cautiously.

But this return question was a very shocking thing. It was perfectly obvious that this Laodicean sought to find out what her faith was merely that he might cheerfully declare himself of the same way of thinking, and she could not countenance any such piece of depravity; so she made some excuse for breaking off

the conversation, and departed into the house.

It was a couple of days thereafter that she received the answer to the letter she had sent to Kirk o' Shields. Flora and she had been out driving with Aunt Gilchrist until late in the afternoon (for a wonder, Captain Ludovick was not with them—he had been summoned away on business); and when they returned home they were met by Hugh, who declared that he had been working hard all day, and besought the two girls to go out with him for a row in the gig, for there was a clear evening light shining all around, and the loch was still. Flora good-naturedly acquiesced, and so did Alison; and both of them would have forthwith gone down to the shore, but that Hugh happened to say—

“Oh, there's a letter for you, Alison, lying on the lobby-table. Shall I bring it for you?”

“No,” she said rather hastily—and with some colour mounting to her face, for she guessed what this might be—“I will get it myself. Will you go down to the boat, Flora? I shall be after you in a moment.”

So she quickly went back through the garden, entered the house, and found the letter lying there. Rather breathlessly she tore it open, and glanced rapidly over its several pages, with a wonderful strange feeling rising and rising in her heart. For what was all this? Remonstrances?—reproaches?—warnings of the opprobrium she was earning for herself, and the shame she was bringing on those nearest and dearest to her? No; it was far from that; and she read with an ever-increasing wonder and a joy that she could hardly have explained to herself. The astonishing thing was that Agnes did not even once refer to the fact of Ludovick Macdonell being a Catholic—though that had been

put prominently enough in Alison's letter to her. This was all praise of Ludovick Macdonell himself; though how Agnes could have discerned so many fine and admirable qualities in him during the brief hour of his visit, her sister was far too surprised and pleased to stay to inquire. And very affectionately did Agnes write of Alison herself—quite unusually so, indeed, for people in Kirk o' Shields are reticent in such matters; but now there was a convenient distance separating them; and she could say things on paper that probably she would not have said to Alison herself. And not only did the younger sister appear extremely gratified, and even proud, that Alison was going to marry the young man who had seemed to her so much of a hero, but also she said plainly that she was glad the arrangement on which the Cowan family counted was not going to be carried out. She confessed that she had always

looked forward to seeing Alison a minister's wife ; there was something so wise and gentle and thoughtful about her that she would be a great help and comfort to a congregation ; but James Cowan was not her ideal of a young minister ; moreover, until he got a church, she feared Alison would have been unhappy while living at Corbieslaw. And might she write to Captain Macdonell, to congratulate him ? And would he answer her letter ? She wanted to tell him a good deal about her sister that perhaps he had not discovered yet. Of course, if this was to be a secret in the mean time, as Alison appeared to desire, then a secret it should be ; but she did not understand why there was any necessity. And then the letter wound up with all sorts of kind wishes and messages : it was about as comforting an epistle as could have been composed in these peculiar circumstances.

For many and many a day thereafter that happy evening lingered in Alison's memory, though she hardly knew how she got through the garden, and across the road, and down the shingle to the boat that was awaiting her. All the air seemed full of music ; this was like a love-letter that had been sent her ; all kinds of wistful fancies that had once been discarded were summoned back now ; and she wished to say just two words to Ludovick, and to look into his eyes.

"You seem to have had good news, Alison," said Flora to her, when she had got seated at the tiller, and the two cousins were leisurely pulling out into the loch.

"Yes," she answered, with her cheeks grown rosy-red, "I—I have had a very kind letter—from Agnes."

"Oh, from Agnes?" Flora repeated, with a glance of surprise ; but she said nothing further ; and presently brother

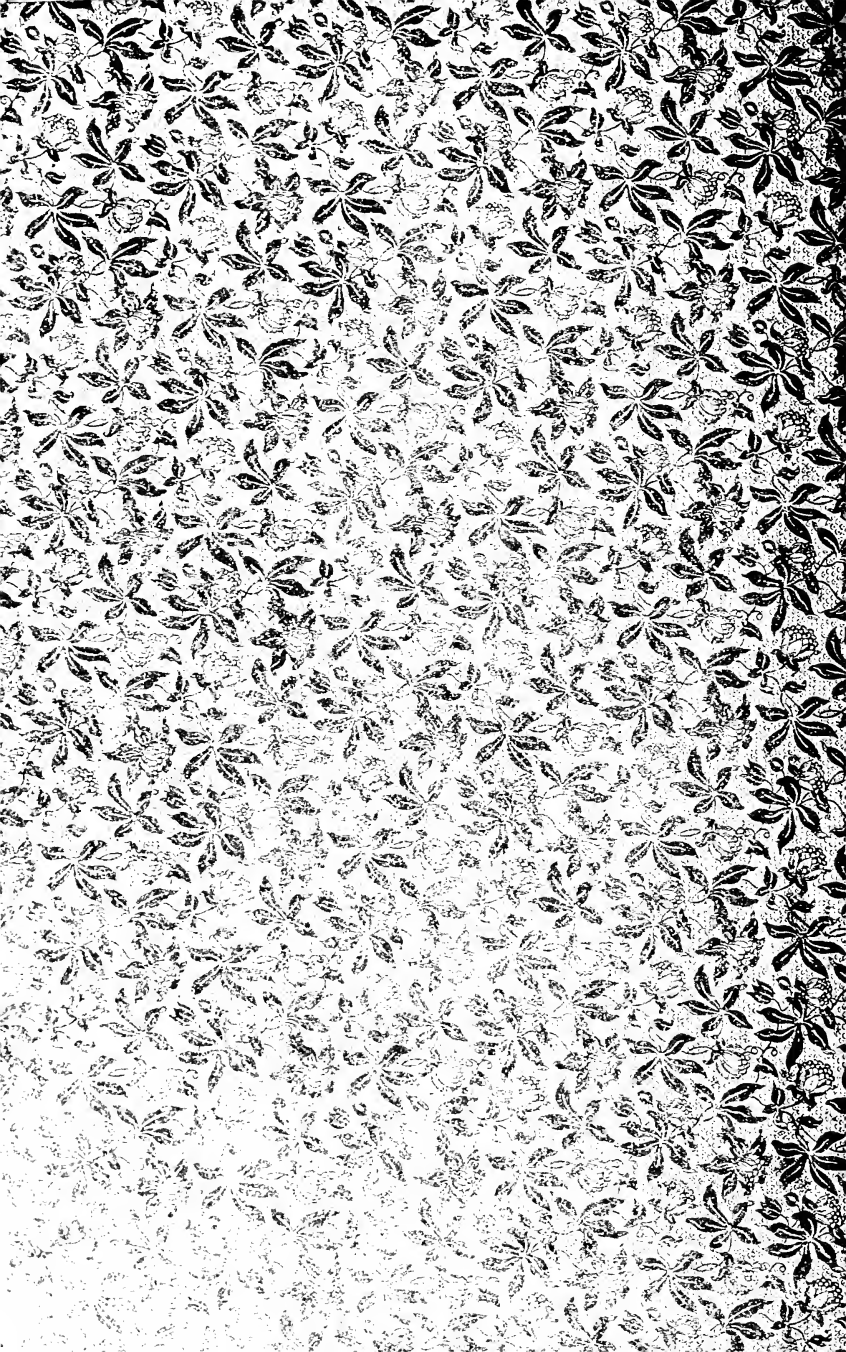
and sister had settled into their long steady stroke, which seemed to afford them sufficient interest and occupation.

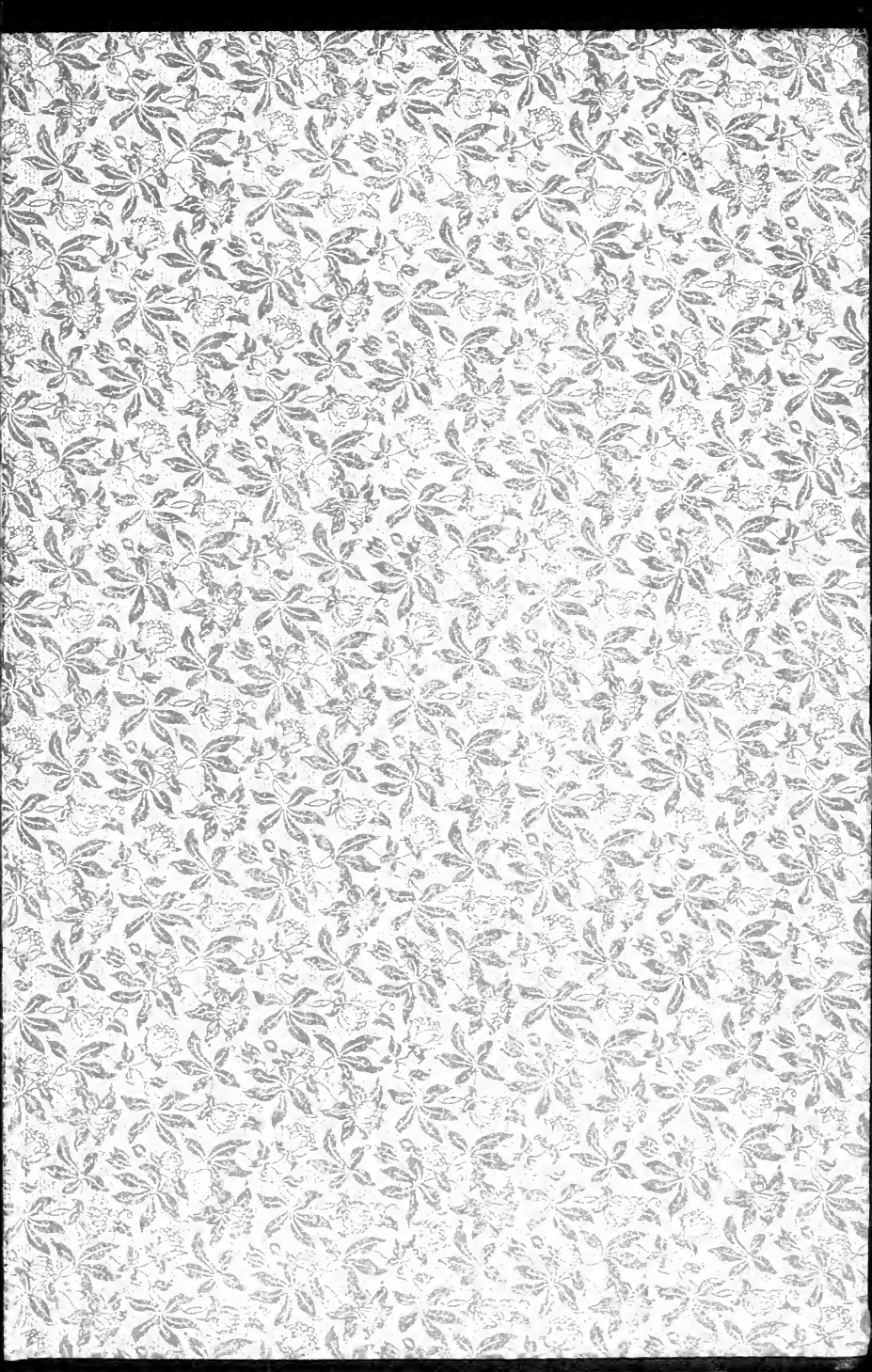
As for Alison, she did not care to break the gracious silence that was all around them ; her heart was murmuring to her of its own happiness as they pulled along. She did not think of asking herself whether there was not something suspicious in the fact of Agnes having so completely ignored all her references to Captain Ludovick being a Catholic, and the possible trouble arising therefrom ; she did not reflect that her sister might, out of an extreme delicacy and kindness, have refused, at such a time, to say anything that would dim her tender hopes. No ; she only thought that she would like to show this letter to Ludovick. Did it not confirm all his prognostications ? Was it not a fair beginning ? Her heart within her said yes again and again, with an exceeding comfort and joy.

Moreover, she had plenty of time to weave these fond fancies; for the two cousins, as they worked away at the oars, were humming together snatches of Gaelic airs that did not interfere with her. It was a beautiful evening, now that the sun had sunk behind the western hills: just above the lofty peaks the sky was of the clearest gold, fading into a pale translucent purple overhead; while the waters of the loch around them were all of a trembling and lapping lilac-gray, with the universal, sudden, bewildering ripples grown almost black. As the time went by, the twilight became more wan and ghostly; and yet the objects along the opposite shore, under the darkening hills and the pine-woods, could be made out with a strange, a livid, distinctness. Then the first lights began to appear—a quivering orange ray here and there that told of a distant window or perhaps of an anchored yacht making all

snug for the night. When they finally got ashore, and made their way up to the house through the garden, the slumbering air was sweet with the scents of the flowers, and there were bats flitting about the eaves, suddenly swooping between them and the pale, clear sky. On the threshold she paused and looked back. It was an evening long to be remembered—an evening of visions and dreams.

END OF VOL. II.





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